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Human Kaleidoscopes: Cultivating Success in Non-Traditional Students

Carolyn Coles Benton
Antioch University - PhD Program in Leadership and Change

HUMAN KALEIDOSCOPES: CULTIVATING SUCCESS IN NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

CAROLYN COLES BENTON

A DISSERTATION

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Carolyn Coles Benton

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Approved by:

Elizabeth Holloway, Ph.D., Chair date

Philomena Essed, Ph.D., Committee Member date

Christian Blum, Ph.D., Committee Member date

Charles E. Campbell, Ph.D., External Reader date

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"I know how to live on almost nothing or with everything. I have learned the secret of living in every situation, whether it is with a full stomach or empty, with plenty or little. For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength." Philippians 4:12-13 (NLT)

Despite this academic journey beginning as a kind of personal goal, the completion of this doctoral process has—by far—stretched into other distinguishable areas of my life; explicitly, my professional, emotional and spiritual vitality will never be the same as a positive aftereffect of the challenges and occurrences experienced along the path. Beyond question, an extraordinary level of intellectual motivation, commitment and diligence have been required. To earnestly accomplish the intense tasks that were part of an often unstructured creation and develop an approach that refined my skills while I exerted myself striving to maintain an open mind and willingness to work with others, I unwaveringly relied on my faith. Even as I welcomed opportunities that ordinarily would not be appealing, I would find myself in meditation and deep reflection as I sought the direction and provision from my Lord and Savior who shielded me from those risks and perils—seen and unseen. In humble submission to God the Father for providing me with the strength and determination, through it all, to complete each stage of the doctoral journey, I am eternally grateful. The reality of this dream would not have been possible for me without God's grace and mercy.

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my competencies. I am exceedingly proud to offer a promising contribution to the field of education, under Dr. Holloway's tutelage.

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Legendary American jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald once said, "Just don't give up trying to do what you really want to do. . . . Where there's love and inspiration, I don't think you can go wrong." That being said, I acknowledge with affection and respect my cohort, colleague, and good friend, Marcia Tate Arunga. I appreciate and value her beyond mere words. To my forever classmate, Betty Lanier Perry; we have been faithful lifelong learners, and I am grateful for her with me throughout the journey.

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It is monumental to note, my strength was enriched by the stories of fourteen non-traditional students that shared their personal experiences and the barriers to success that they were able to overcome, and accomplish their academic goals. Because of them, I had a personal responsibility to continue going forward; and, as a mentor, students look to me to manage through this crisis of bereavement within my own circle and stay on the course.

Finally, to all who offered words of encouragement, deeds of thoughtful consideration, acts of inspiration—whether great or small, whatever your part—in helping me complete this journey, I extend my thanks.

In Memory

of

-Louis C. Benton-

You started my journey with me; I completed yours by your side.

We are still on this journey—together, Lou.

-Commodore Coles, Sr.-

Your light shines forever in me, Dad; it will not dim.

Without any doubt, question or compromise, the hallmark of my reflections in culminating this scholarly journey is the death of my husband, Lou. He faithfully accompanied me to many of the Antioch residencies. Our Antioch family witnessed Lou's physical decline; and, nearing the end of his life, he was left with little option of moving about independently and

had to remain in the hotel room while I attended classes as he became too weak to interact with his newfound friends at Antioch. Classmates came to visit with him at the hotel, which demonstrated the sensitivity and compassion shown to Lou during his journey of transition. He was well received by Cohort 9 and thoroughly enjoyed and respected the scholarly dialogue that accompanied our spirited social gatherings concluding each residency. He often reflected on how much he enjoyed developing a special fondness for "Nora" as she extended a special caring spirit to him. I will be forever grateful to the members of Cohort 9 who became a tremendous circle of support during a most difficult time.

Shortly thereafter, approximately three months later, my father passed away at the age of 89 years old. He was the last patriarch of our family. When Lou expired, there was a semi-colon embossed in that chapter of my life. As time would have it, showing no favor, when my father died, that chapter concluded differently; and, a period now denoted the ending. My father's death represented a conclusion of a chapter in my life journey that I will always cherish and hold dear. Both of these admired men—leaders, in their own rite—earnestly wanted me to carry on, live out their legacies, fulfill my dream, and strive to pursue the completion of this journey. And, so I did.

Dedication

With Love & Wisdom

To My Children—

Taheera Nicole Coles Benton and Louis Coles Benton, II

My Mother—

Bernice Henderson Coles

With your gentle, delicate presence physically lingering, you remain the primary influence and heartfelt motivation in my life. Your existence encourages me to move forward and persevere—in spite of every adversity. After being married to my father for over 65 years, and now attempting to thrive with your own health challenges, I seek your strength and courage as you endeavor to press on, even in the absence of my father and your beloved companion. It is my fervent prayer that you celebrate with me this milestone as you represent both Dad and Lou within my heart.

My Beloved Village—

...consisting of family members and friends, past and present, for each having a story of their own and influencing my life.

Abstract

Non-traditional students are a growing population in higher education, yet our understandings of the unique factors that predict their success have not increased. This narrative inquiry examines the lived experiences of high school dropouts entering the college arena as non-traditional students, attempting to improve their personal and academic lifestyles by acquiring a General Education Diploma (GED) in addition to obtaining an associate's degree from a for-profit postsecondary educational institution. The purpose of this study is to better understand the lives and circumstances of students, leading up to their dropping out of high school. Participants' reflections of their own college experiences, specifically to course experiences and interactions with their instructors and college staff officials, are analyzed and evaluated. In this study a qualitative design methodology is utilized through a narrative approach, which is supported by a storytelling format. Data collection in the natural setting is used to develop a narrative of the experiences of non-traditional students over a period of five semesters. It is the intention of the researcher to address the economic, social, ethnic, and racial experiences of a population of students including Native Americans, African Americans, Latino/Hispanics, certain Asian American groups, and poor European Americans. As the emergence of non-traditional students continues to grow to become a major constituency on campuses, academics, practitioners, and policy makers working with this particular population need to recognize their unique characteristics. Educational systems must recognize that retention efforts that are required to foster supportive and innovative systems that will foster flexibility and a nonjudgmental environment will create and maintain a culture of completion and success. The electronic version of this dissertation is at Ohio Link ETD Center, www.ohiolink.edu/etd and AURA, http://aura.antioch.edu/

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Introduction

Background

In the 21st century Americans are recurrently learning through various media and national studies of the great racial disparities in American education. Beginning in elementary school, the high incidence of discipline, suspension, and truancy in African American communities is evident. Moreover, non-traditional students, and in particular African American adult learners, appear to lack the motivation and support to aspire and achieve a higher education. These conditions ultimately affect their standard of living, quality of life, and the ability to thrive in society. Currently, in America, the stock market index, gross domestic product, consumer confidence, and spending are exhibiting measurable growth; yet the African American population in the United States shows an increasing presence of poverty and social disconnection. They are falling behind in establishing a lifestyle comparable to their non-African American groups as they persist in lacking an average income, health care, and education.

The late William "Bill" Powell Lear (founder of the Lear Jet Corporation and successful 20th century inventor and businessman) said, "One of the unfortunate things about our education system is that we do not teach students how to avail themselves of their subconscious capabilities" (Michel, 2013, p. 99). The presence of more affluent, wealthy, and powerful African Americans now erroneously leads to the false conclusion of racial equality. The fact of the matter is that inequality is growing in the United States; it has never disappeared. Statesman Kofi Annan (former Ghanaian diplomat who once served as the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations) stated some years ago, "Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family" (P. Bernard, 2012, p. 2).

It becomes distinguishable then that education, particularly within the African American community, determines sustainability in America, and, as of today, educational attainment is notably decreasing.

Many Americans reflect on the advances made in the years since the historic Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which legislated equal access to educational opportunity the law of the land (1954). As one reflects on how some African Americans have seized educational opportunity, resulting in the growing ranks of African American college graduates, one may also recognize that the challenge is far from complete. A number of 21st century studies and surveys reports a decrease in enrollment and an increase in unsuccessful completion of degree and certification programs. The promise of equity and opportunity in education remains unfulfilled, despite the efforts of students, families, policymakers, and academic institutions. While more than 5.3 million African Americans currently hold a college degree, in 2011, a mere 40% of African American students and 51% of Latino students graduated college. This is compared to 62% of their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Problem Statement

Historically, a high school diploma was all that was required to secure the touted American Dream. Today, however, a college degree has become the threshold for approaching middle class economic status (Haskins, Holzer, & Leman, 2009). Persistent college completion gaps prevent non-traditional students from reaching their true social and economic potential: a tragedy that impacts not only communities of color but also a nation imploding with poverty and despair. Embedded within one of the United States' most enormous, yet identifiable challenges in the field of education, exists a silent epidemic of the nation's high school dropouts.

As our nation experiences economic growth in specific areas, the sweeping benefits of a college degree become more apparent. By 2018, 63% of all job openings will require at least some education and training beyond high school (Carneval, Smith, & Strohl, 2010). Full-time workers with a Bachelor's degree earned $56,506 annually, $21,100 more than high school graduates. In 2011 those workers with some college, but no degree, earned 14% more than high school graduates (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Moreover, those students having no high school diploma or GED, commonly suffer a downward spiral economically, unable to find or achieve consistent or gainful employment.

Completing college is indisputably no longer a luxury; rather, it is an economic necessity. To add to the complexity of the situation, non-traditional students are largely uncounted by institutions and missing completely from (IPEDS) Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data Systems (Complete College America, 2011). This non-traditional student group is referred to with many different labels: adult learners, high-risk students, and non-traditional students. The National Center for Education Statistics defines non-traditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delays enrollment in postsecondary education, attends college part-time, works full time, is financially independent for financial aid purposes, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma (Pelletier, 2010). These criteria represent a wide swath of today's college students, and while non-traditional students, a great number of whom are African American adult learners, can be defined by a number of characteristics, many prioritize employment when negotiating work, school, and family responsibilities. The students' work and family dynamic impacts the type of postsecondary institution they attend; the number of credits they take each semester; and, remarkably, their college persistence and completion rates.

Chao and Good (2004) state that non-traditional students have increased from 4 million in 1980 to over 6 million in 2000; they also make up more than 40% of the U.S. undergraduate population. To that end, it's less surprising that nearly two-thirds of all African American non-traditional students meet the following characteristics of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES):

- African American Non-traditional Students are more likely to be single parents: 48% compared to 23% of Whites, 34% of Latinos, 36% of Native Americans, and 19% of Asians.
- Most African American Non-traditional Students are in 2-year institutions, which include 42% and another 27%, who are enrolled in private, for-profit institutions, a much larger percentage than any other group.

It is relevant to note that the college (where I conducted this study) exclusively participates in the aforementioned preparatory program and maintains a 50% demographic rate of African American students; most times these students are referenced as non-traditional students or adult learners by society and in national and research studies. In essence, then, shifting a negative paradigm for African Americans with regard to academia requires programs that purposely address the needs and demands of this population. Programs that will include and engage these non-traditional students and support them in starting and attaining educational goals are critical in offering equal opportunities to Black students.[1]

An historical example of a negative paradigm might be that of Autherine Lucy Foster, who was the first Black student to attend the University of Alabama located in Tuscaloosa.

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[1] "Black American" and "African American" are generally terms used for referring to Americans with an African ancestry. However, there is often confusion as to which term should be used and which term may be distressing to people of color. The terms Black and African-American will be used interchangeably throughout this study, placing no distinction between immigrants from Ghana, Haiti, or other Caribbean islands. However, it is important to note that the term "Black," came into existence during the 60s and 70s and was a replacement for the word "negro." During the 80s, there was a shift in perception that recognized the African ancestry of all people, and thus, "black" took on a larger connotation relating to ethnicity, culture, and skin color.

Upon graduating from Miles College (a historically Black College established in 1898 with roots in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) in Birmingham in the mid-1950s, she was passionately motivated to continue her academic experience. Foster went on to become a well-educated member of society at a time when she was an unwelcome Negro desiring to attend a university that had no desire to accept her. After years of battling the courts during the civil rights movement, Autherine Lucy was finally granted the opportunity to attend the University of Alabama and, to this day, recognizes it as her alma mater. Her determination and fortitude afforded her the choice to challenge the traditions of the era and fight for a quality education. If African Americans of today—in the 21st century—were supported with appropriate academic programming and provided the same opportunities that their Caucasian equivalents were given, the American educational system would serve to strengthen the entire country collectively. A just and fair educational system, one designed to eradicate racial disparities, holds the potential to build a literate, progressive nation.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

It is the purpose of this study to advance the conversation beyond the goal of access to and equality of education toward identifying the needed support and resources to mitigate the challenges faced by African American non-traditional students. This study will focus on uncovering the determinants of college completion, upward mobility, and economic empowerment for African American non-traditional students through a biographical narrative methodology. Particularly, the students in this study will be first generation college students that require a completion of their New York State General Educational Development (GED) while working towards an associate's degree. They will be participating or will have participated in an educational program or programs that offer personalized services designed to address barriers

faced by students of this identified population. Through in-depth interviewing of students who have experienced the challenges of entering educational programs as non-traditional students, it is hoped that deeper understanding of the circumstances and educational environments that fail African Americans and other underserved populations, as well as those that contribute to their success, will emerge.

Context of Study

The site selected for this study is Kenmore & Kokin College an urban campus located in the heart of a city in western New York. Kenmore & Kokin College will be the name utilized in preserving the anonymity of participants along with the college when conducting educational and social network research. The college programs are designed to serve primarily the non-traditional student. Founded in 1854 as a business institute, the campus is housed on the third and fourth floors of an office building that houses several other professional offices including business and banking, as well as restaurants; in spite of the professional environment of the college, the students are not protected from the realities of ongoing violence within their community. In the summer of 2010, eight people leaving a party at a downtown restaurant were shot early one Saturday, four of them fatally. Recently, on November 6, 2014, a four-hour standoff began when a gunman took three hostages inside a local pawn shop: an incident that ended with the suspect's suicide. In spite of the circumstances surrounding the everyday life experiences of these students, many of them persist in their educational pursuits.

Researcher's Questions

The following research questions focus on the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on the campus of Kenmore & Kokin College in New York, as well as the experiences that promoted or impeded their persistence to graduate.

1. Is student self-identity linked to academic achievement and successful outcomes?
2. What role did faculty support and/or classroom environment play in student persistence in seeking admission into college—in particular, Kenmore & Kokin College?
3. What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their postsecondary education at proprietary colleges?

Characteristics of a Non-Traditional Student

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) report, the population of non-traditional students has risen dramatically. Further, in addition to the specific groups identified, non-traditional students were defined as having at least one or more of the following characteristics: (a) does not enter postsecondary enrollment in the same year that he or she completed high school, (b) attends part-time for at least part of the academic year, (c) works full time, (d) is considered financially independent from a legal guardian, (e) has dependents other than a spouse, (f) is a single parent, and (g) does not have a high school diploma but does have a General Educational Development (GED) equivalency credential. As a result of these extensive definitions and expansive characteristics, the term *non-traditional* seems to represent one's lifestyle and past educational experiences. This broad description makes it close to impossible to pin point or target non-traditional students in a dominant group for marketing or recruiting purposes; therefore, institutions must consider a more comprehensive view of who potential students might be and how these students perceive themselves, given they are potential representatives of this growing population.

Non-traditional students are usually placed in three categories: highly non-traditional, moderately non-traditional, and minimally non-traditional, and in such research the changing trends of undergraduates with multiple characteristics are presented and discussed. In order to examine this phenomenon, NCES constructed a scale that represented a simple sum of all non-traditional characteristics (from 0 to 7), with zero representing traditional students. The degree to which students were considered non-traditional was stratified considering the high, moderate, and minimal. Minimally non-traditional students are those who only have one non-traditional characteristic. In general, these students are most often older and enrolled part time in postsecondary education. Moderately non-traditional students are those with two or three non-traditional characteristics. These students tend to be older than the typical college student, live independently, and attend part time. Lastly, highly non-traditional students are representative of four or more non-traditional characteristics. "In addition to those characteristics associated with moderately non-traditional students, about two-thirds of highly non-traditional students either had dependents or worked full time, and about one-quarter were single parents" (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2002).

Further, while looking closely at the qualities these students possess, the NCES (U.S. Department of Education, 2002) additionally reports that for-profit and non-profit postsecondary institutions experienced the highest percentage of growth among non-traditional students. In the 2008–2009 almanac edition of the Chronicle of Higher Education, the University of Phoenix enrolled an extraordinary number of students, more than any other university in America. Kelly (2001) suggests the following:

> a growing number of traditional colleges and universities are currently under pressure to be more responsive to the needs of students, parents, employers and communities that are turning to some of the same entrepreneurial, customer-oriented approaches that have been used so successfully by for-profit institutions. (p. 2)

The shifting demographics and increase in distance learning course options also indicate that it may be time to rethink the traditional models of the education delivery system rather than focusing on traditional and non-traditional student populations, given that non-traditional students comprise the majority on college campuses.

First of all, more than 40% of all undergraduates in the 2011–2012 school years were enrolled in community colleges and other two-year institutions, according to education department data. In 2001 less than 4% of full-time four-year students attended for-profit schools. A decade later that figure was nearly 11%, and continues to rise. That leaves 7.3 million full-time students in four-year programs at public and nonprofit colleges. The age of non-traditional students represents more than two million of the remaining students that were over age 21 in the fall of 2011, the traditional age of a first-semester senior. Nearly a million were at least 25, and nearly half a million were in their 30s and older (U. S. Department of Education, 2013).

Understanding the following numbers sheds light on the current enrollment and continuing population examined in this study. Table 1.1 below is reflective of non-traditional students who were enrolled in Kenmore & Kokin College during the fall 2011 Semester.

Table 1.1

Fall 2011 Semester Demographic Information

Gender	Percentage
Female	79%
Male	20%
Unknown	1%

Age	Percentage
20-29	50%
30-39	24%

Ethnicity	Percentage
Black, African American	50%
White, non-Hispanic	39%
Hispanic	4%

	Percentage
Day	50%
Evening	40%
Online	10%

	Percentage
Standard Diploma	77%
GED	17%
Achieve	4%

Earned Degree(s)	Percentage
Associate Degree	90%
Bachelor Degree	10%

Note. White, non-Hispanic (39%), a woman (79%) in her 20's (50%) who earned her high school diploma (77%) and is a day (50%) student pursuing her Associates degree (90%) in either medical assisting (22%), criminal justice (16%), medical administrative assisting (13%) or business (12%) (Kenmore & Kokin College, 2011)

Data in this section reflects one aspect of the problem in the emerging numbers of non-traditional students despite higher education's challenges in defining these learners.

Another aspect of the problem notes personal factors or characteristics that contribute to their challenges with academic success. The third and final aspect of the problem reflects higher education's inability to understand and respond effectively to the needs of non-traditional learners. The complex challenges faced by non-traditional students include NCES (2002) characteristics: (a) lack of a standard high school diploma, (b) dependents other than spouse, (c) single parents, (d) working fulltime, (e) being financially independent of parents, (f) parttime enrollment, and (g) delayed enrollment at post-secondary education; learning characteristics, drawn from the literature: (a) experience, (b) lack of social network, and (c) adult learning needs; and other identity characteristics: (a) first generation college student; (b) immigrants; (c) over-represented racial minority, and (d) commuter (Buglione, 2012).

Kenmore & Kokin College Programs

The continuity of service as the primary academic advisor was established as a part of the initial student intake process, which created a synergy of movement by the same academic advisor throughout the three programs of academic success; these programs go by the names of the *Pathways Adult Education Program*, the *Pre-collegiate Academy,* and the *Achieve Student Program.* All of these programs co-existed in a coordinated, multidimensional effort to aid students in successful completion of their academic degrees and/or graduation. These efforts are supported through social literature, which includes references to "the call" to social work, social service, academic support, and student advisement (Corey & Corey, 2007; deMontigny, 1995; LeCroy, 2002) as a meaningful life path that people have found and are following. Through the introduction to social work texts, there are frequent discussions of the rewards of being a helper and the countless gifts of the profession that provide opportunities to reflect on the quality of life.

As noted by Corey and Corey (2007), "Helping others can provide you (the social worker) with the satisfaction of knowing that you are making a significant difference to others, which, in itself, enhances the meaning of life" (p. 15). Does the call to serve among non-traditional students as "natural helpers" support avenues by which their leadership can manifest itself in real, sustainable change in those communities? Is the call to serve consistent with the model of servant leadership that is grounded in the belief that holds the needs of the community above self? This study seeks to evaluate these sub-questions in an attempt to understand what can be learned about leadership from the perspective of these non-traditional students. It is expected that this research will inform the policy and practice of education in order to increase recruitment and retention often overlooked as potential professional contributions and social impact of their labyrinth in higher education.

While it is important that students master academic skills, it is my impression that nonacademic skills are also vital in preparing students for successful outcomes that facilitate lifelong learning. Muller (2001) explored the influence of caring relationships between teachers and students with regard to achievement. The research analyzed the teachers' and students' perceptions of their relationships and the effects of the perceptions on students' math progress. The findings suggested that those at-risk students who perceived their teachers' genuine concern for their success benefited from these caring relationships. Students were particularly vulnerable to their teachers' opinions, especially if their math achievement was barely at a passing level. In the end, Muller (2001) agrees that disadvantaged students are likely to benefit from building caring relationships.

Kenmore & Kokin College's *Achieve Student Program* includes academic advisement that provides continuous supportive counseling designed to guide and nurture students as they

face the challenge of confronting new experiences for which they would be otherwise unprepared. Intrusive academic advising has been identified as one of the primary approaches in handling the nonacademic and personal factors that disrupt student performance and inhibit success. Since these outside influences are often spontaneous and sporadic in nature, a nonlinear, multidimensional approach is of the utmost importance—establishing a structural framework of non-judgmental flexible nuances.

The student's primary role of intervention was to seek personal validation of self through their educational experiences, using divergent thinking and creativity to construct new educational narratives through positive language and collaborative communication. The title "Achieve Student" suggests positive accomplishment within a student's academic life; positive word usage is established to provide a framework for students to continue their journey of success by entering the college to complete New York State (GED) General Education Development requirements in addition to accomplishing academic goals to obtain an associate's degree. Dialogue among first-year students is also an essential and rewarding component of the program, allowing for self-reflection and self-reflexivity. Such dialogue provides opportunities for students to share stories to shape new perspectives and possibilities, connecting an on-going weekly discussion regarding the nuances and challenges of balancing work life and family, along with the new discoveries taking place in their academic life: namely, that which happens in their traditional developmental education courses and during tutoring sessions to address academic challenges.

The academic advising process engages the student in personal interaction between student and academic advisor, which may adopt numerous appearances. Non-judgmental intervention by the academic advisor is critical in the initial process of linking the student to a

traditional academic setting. Suitably of the initial intake process, prescriptive academic advising is almost a clerical function acquiring the student's background information and identifying the salient support system that is vital to the student's success. Frequently, it may give the impression of maintaining a clerical role; however, in that prescriptive, academic advising requires the logging of necessary information such as primary telephone numbers, secondary numbers, and employment numbers, as well as identifying those people who play a significant role in the student's life.

Developmental advising hones in on the growth of the student, instilling an awareness of the relationship between education and life, while fostering the student's ability to set realistic academic and career goals. The advisor endeavors to implement appropriate programs for the student to achieve successful learning experiences, readily keeping in mind the student's life extending beyond the college student years. This is an opportunity for the advisor to assign courses that would meet the student's home, work, and life schedule. All of these factors are taken into consideration to assure the student utilizes the advisor as a resource for dialogic communication that engages both parties in collaborative dialogue to create and maintain a schedule that is tailored for the student's individual achievement. Moreover, the relationship concentrates not only on academic competence but also on personal involvement and the development or validation of a life purpose—all of which are associated with academic success.

Upon the completion of the scheduling process, students are encouraged to return weekly to discuss their feelings and attitudes relative to their new academic experience as a first-semester student. Structured intervention protocols are used to motivate the student to seek help at the first sign of academic difficulty. Correspondingly, weekly meetings may serve as a tool for identifying early indicators, which will require immediate action-oriented responses to

specific academic or personal problems as they occur. These indicators can be addressed in a timely manner as the professionally trained advisor responds to various situations, creating a positive approach to problem solving and/or recommending a referral environment for the student to acquire appropriate psychosocial intervention.

This continuity of service provides the advisor and student an opportunity to engage in collaborative decision-making initiatives to support academic goals, successful completion of required coursework, and retention. Advisors also have the opportunity to engage in discussions of citizenship and servant leadership—giving back to their community. Commonly, students will suggest service community projects that will enhance community organizations, viewing servant leadership as a part of the collaborative conversation where student success is celebrated. Celebrations are centered on the student's academic achievement, cultural integrity, and servant leadership. Recognition dinners are held to salute the student's achievement in academia. Remarkably, many students have obtained their GEDs, and others are awaiting college graduation.

The Achieve Program is a structured developmental education program that identifies and addresses students' academic, nonacademic, and personal factors—citing that each may positively affect student success and retention. As a result of closely interacting with our non-traditional student population, we—as advisors, mentors, and culturally responsive practitioners—must continue to broaden the thinking of developmental education faculty to ensure that we are researching on-going initiatives that continue to improve and promote academic excellence and civic engagement as we guide our students' transformational journey of academic success, cultural integrity, and social reconnection.

Scope of Study

The scope of this study includes an intense examination of the essence of the lived experiences of non-traditional students, including their challenges and successes on the Campus of Kenmore & Kokin College in New York; additionally, it explores how these experiences promoted or impeded students as they strove to obtain their GED certificate and complete all course work required to graduate.

This research will examine the stories of non-traditional students enrolled in credit-bearing, undergraduate higher education courses. As participants share their personal experiences, the focus will be on a common phenomenon that describes the transformation of self and social identity as students continue their journey in the halls of academia.

Within this study, special attention is directed to the barriers to retention and academic success of this population of students (Brown, 2005; Donald, Seay, & Bushko, 2004). In their review of research into retention rates of non-traditional students, Blustein, Schultheiss, and Flum (2004) found that social indicators such as low socioeconomic status, minority status, trauma, drug and alcohol addiction, and chaotic social environments have all been identified as negative predictors of education and social success. These aforementioned social constructs also are attributed to the generational poverty that currently exists within the United States. The study is bound by its inclusive criteria, using students between the ages of 21 and 50 years old as participants. This age range is reflective of the definition of non-traditional adult learners.

In the past, academics have thought of civic education as a means to promote citizenship, partaking in the difficult work of preparing students for engagement in a diverse world where the formation of who they are and what they have to contribute are both the ends and the means. Civic identity is defined as a feeling of belonging, an experience of investment and ownership in

the local, regional, national, and/or international political communities to which citizens belong (Ketter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002). In my quest to pursue new knowledge and discovery, observing and listening to these students will help me create a civic identity, shaped through their experiences in undergraduate higher education, captured through the auditory and written documentation of the stories of their lived experiences. Certain risks, dangers, and abuses that take place throughout the students' journey to seek a higher education will be discussed to learn the impact of such experiences and how it has affected their motivation to continue the journey and aspire to keep their dream alive. I will examine the historical, social deprivation and the negative impact associated with low-income students living within guidelines of poverty that currently exist in this country. In addition, the study will delve into the extent to which the absence of social capital and cultural capital will determine "the haves" and "the have not's" that make up the complexion of our economic development.

Summary

Conclusively, the first chapter of this study positions the educational structure to give voice to a population of students who have been historically marginalized by mainstream academia. It will describe a path of poverty and failed expectations of young adults dropping out of the educational system and returning to seek a different path of success by completing their GED requirements, thus moving towards an associate's degree in postsecondary education. Gaining the perspective of these adults could potentially establish a framework of questions that could promote social action and behavioral transformation of individuals. Studying a purposeful sample of students and analyzing the data using a narrative model will lend a realistic voice to this body of scholarship.

The second chapter presents an overview of the literature related to non-traditional student definitions, challenges, college readiness, academic support, and retention rates—all focusing on creating a positive venue of cultural completion. The literature will reflect a scholarly array of documentation that will support the journey of non-traditional students from a theoretical framework, subjecting itself to contemporary meaning and support while integrating the traditional work of classical scholars in the fields of education and social sciences. The examination and explanations of this literature will give validation and support to students' resiliency and motivation to create transformational change in establishing a healthier and improved lifestyle that will foster upward mobility as a result of higher education.

The third chapter will employ the historical use of narrative inquiry and seek to establish a foundation of biographical narratives and emergent themes, based on the lived experiences of non-traditional students. This section is followed by a description and justification for the study's methods, which includes the selection of participants, collection of data, and the assessment of findings.

The fourth chapter provides an introduction to the students who have elected to participate in this pensive study. It is in this chapter that readers will give credence to the voices of these students as they pay attention—in the voice of the student participant—to the personal journey traveled in seeking a higher education. Finally, these narratives will begin to identify emergent themes and commonalities of these participants' responses.

The fifth chapter will cross-examine the narratives from these student participants, identifying themes that have emerged from intimate conversations with these students. This discussion will lead to fresh knowledge intended to assist policymakers and stakeholders in institutions of higher education to more appropriately address the needs of non-traditional

students. The chapter engages in an in-depth discussion of related findings with regard to the initial research inquiry as expressed in the introduction and will reveal highlights of student success. This chapter will also highlight the implications of this study for future research aimed at growth and development of newly acquired, purposeful knowledge that may be extended beyond the walls of academia and duplicated within industry and cultural leadership in this 21st century.

Literature Review

The Silent Epidemic: High School Drop Outs in Urban America and Challenges for Non-Traditional Students in Postsecondary Education

Part I: Poverty, segregation, and educational racial inequality. The number of non-traditional students entering institutions of higher education continues to expand; however, our understanding of the distinct factors that must come together to efficiently predict their success at the college level has not improved. As noted in Buglione (2012) "Economic challenges, changing work demands, and the desire for personal and professional advancement fuel the non-traditional student's return to school (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Their isolation and lack of social networks lead to poor academic outcomes as defined by retention, graduation, and degree attainment" (p. iv). In order to provide the most expeditious response, there are three central and overlapping factors that must be recognized—poverty, segregation, and educational racial inequality—all of which highlight the relationship between high school drop outs in urban America and the challenges for non-traditional students in postsecondary education.

Authors Joe Williams and Pedro Noguera (2010) in their article "Poor Schools or Poor Kids?" reinforced the positioning of basic principles in connection to poverty, inadequate health care, housing, and nutrition. These conditions impact a child's emotional development and learning capacity. While it is clear that poverty does not cause academic failure, it is a factor that profoundly influences the character of schools and student performance. Notably, poverty continues to be one of the three interrelated social constructs evidenced in the documentation of inequality among poor urban students. First, considerably less money is spent on the education of poor children. The quality of facilities, availability of learning materials, and the ability of schools to attract and retain highly qualified personnel is usually reflective of per-pupil spending. Second, the nonacademic needs of children including social, emotional, and psychological

requirements that often have an impact on learning are commonly ignored or poorly managed in schools which house poor urban students. Lastly, schools serving large numbers of poor children typically lack the resources and expertise to respond to their academic and social needs (Lee, 2004). These social inequalities continue to provide much discussion surrounding school reform in the U.S. and their link to racial inequality.

The nation's dropout problem is concentrated in segregated, high poverty schools. Orfield (2004), in his book titled *Dropouts in America,* reported that in half of the nation's schools there were 90% or more White; only one school in fifty had students who were consistently dropping out of high school. However, in that same year, evaluating numbers related to the high school class of 2002, the same source indicates that almost a third of the high school students, who were more than 50% minority, graduated less than half of their class (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Among schools that were 90% or more White students, only one school in fifty had this kind of record. Half of the majority-minority schools had dropout rates over 40% as did two-thirds of the schools with less than a tenth White students (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Nationally, the gap in graduation rates between districts with high and low proportions of low income students was 18.4% in 2001, even higher than the gap between majority White and majority-minority districts (Swanson 2004).

Rothstein (2004), in his book titled *Class and School*, reviewed a wide array of studies that have shown for decades strong links among individual poverty, school poverty, race, and educational inequality. These studies showed that poverty is strongly related to everything from the child's physical development to the family's ability to stay in a neighborhood long enough so that a school might have an effect on the student. His analysis suggested that there is weaker education in highly impoverished schools and that the major claims about successful reforms in

these schools are unwarranted. He argued that it is unrealistic to expect to change schools without dealing with some of the issues that arise from poverty.

Who drops out of high school? Within the United States, individual states vary in the methods used to collect and report statistical information, making comparisons amongst states difficult. As a result the U.S. Department of Education collects an annual census called the Common Core of Data (CCD) for all educational districts; CCD uses standardized measurements, procedures, and methods, easing the burden of comparison. As a result one of the more accurate measurements of graduation rates is the Cumulative Promotion Index (CPI) (Swanson, 2004). Defining graduation as that specified by the No Child Left Behind Act, the CPI method uses data reported by the CCD. According to Swanson (2004) "it [the CPI] relies on enrollment information and diploma counts, and avoids the notoriously unreliable dropout data some other methods use" (p. 13). Using the CPI method, Swanson calculated that the graduation rate in 2001 was 68%, a significantly lower figure than the rate reported by federal and state agencies.

When incorporating demography such as race/ethnicity, the graduation rates decrease further. For example, in the Northeast in 2001, Whites had graduation rates that were above the national average at 78.7% while Asians were near the national average at 65.2%. However, the graduation rates of other minority groups in the Northeast showed an appalling trend: African Americans 45.8%, Hispanics 35.6%, and American Indians 31.8%. These numbers show a 30-47% disparity in the graduation rate when compared to White students. Unfortunately, these numbers reflect a common trend for minorities in urban schools, reflecting a minority majority (Swanson, 2004). Nevertheless, these statistics share only a small percentage of the human story

of why students drop out; for example, the majority of our nation's urban schools are located in dilapidated neighborhoods where families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds live.

Swanson (2004) established the fact that socioeconomic status was the strongest predictor of high school graduation rates. However, "segregation levels and district size continue to display sizeable relationships with a district's overall graduation rate, even after controlling for other factors" (Swanson, 2004, p. 30). The strongest relationship associated with poverty and race is among African American students: "African American graduation rates approach 70% in very low-poverty districts, a rate about 10 percentage points higher than Hispanic or American Indian students" (p. 32). Orfield (2004) examined dropouts from the 1970s to the 1990s, according to race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, revealing the following:

> among people of equivalent social origins, minorities are less likely to drop out than whites . . . the findings strongly suggest that differentials in high school dropout rates between minority and majority students are primarily a function of family and socioeconomic background and only secondarily to residential location. (p. 96)

With an increasingly competitive global economy, the consequences of dropping out of high school are devastating to individuals, communities, and the national economy. Young adults, at an absolute minimum, need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunities to earn decent living wages. A community having a vast population of parents who are dropouts is unlikely to have stable families or sound social structures. Most businesses that hire workers with technical skills require a minimum of a high school diploma. Although rarely the topic of public discussion, the United States is allowing a perilously high percentage of students to disappear from the educational pipeline before graduating from high school. Nationally, high school graduation rates are low for all students. In fact, of White/Caucasian students, only an estimated 68% of those who enter 9th grade graduated with a regular diploma in 12th grade. According to Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004), only 50% of all Black

students, 51% of Native American students, and 53% of all Hispanic students graduated from high school. Black, Native American, and Hispanic males fare even worse, with graduation rates of 43%, 47%, and 48%, respectively (Orfield et al., 2004). To compound this invisible crisis, official dropout statistics neither accurately count, nor report, the vast numbers of students who do not graduate from high school.

Socioeconomic segregation is a stubborn, multidimensional, and deeply significant cause of educational inequality. U.S. schools are now 41% non-White, and the great majority of the non-White students attend schools that exhibit substantial segregation. Levels of segregation for Black and Latino students have been steadily increasing since the 1980s, as indicated in a series of ongoing reports; the most recent is that by Orfield and Lee (2004). The nation's shockingly high dropout problem is concentrated in urban high schools with a disproportionate number of students from racial minority backgrounds (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). The high level of poverty among these children, together with exclusionary housing policies and practices, results in students in inner city schools facing isolation not only from the White community but also from middle class schools. Minority children are far more likely than Whites to grow up in persistent poverty.

According to Orfield and Lee (2004) "Race is deeply and systematically linked to many forms of inequality in background, treatment, expectations, and opportunities. From an educational perspective, perhaps the most important of those links is the level of concentrated poverty in a school" (p. 5). A comprehensive federal study of children entering kindergarten across the country shows very large differences in the acquisition of skills invaluable for school success (such skills are generally learned long before the children ever enter a school house) Rathbun, West, & Hausken, 2004). High school dropouts make up a significant number of

non-traditional students transitioning into higher education; this appears to be an increasing social trend. The number of college students 25 years and older has grown from fewer than four million in 1980 to more than six million in 2000. As the trend continues, the face of these students reflects an increasing predominance of young adult learners returning to school and entering college. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, non-traditional students make up more than 40% of the total U.S. undergraduate population (Chao & Good, 2004).

Why students drop out of high school: A dropout's perspective. When a student drops out, it is a clear indication of failure and not just a failure on the part of the student. Some disconnect or severance has occurred among student, educator, educational system, and/or home life that results in attrition; such disconnects often occur long before the decision to leave school has been made (Chávez, Belkin, Hornback, & Adams, 1991). Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) suggested, "Dropping out of school is not a decision that is made on a single morning." (p. 3). Pierson (2013) suggested that no learning can occur without a significant relationship between the student and teacher. Bridgeland et al. (2006) desired to shed light on what is considered an epidemic in society as a whole. Their study included self-assessments from drop-outs regarding their reasons for leaving and identified the top five reasons:

1. classes were not interesting (47%)
2. missed too many days and could not catch up (43%)
3. spent time with people who were not interested in school (42%)
4. had too much freedom and not enough rules in my life (38%)
5. was failing in school (35%) (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 3).

In Bridgeland et al. (2006) students who cited "classes were not interesting," often said instructors just "talked at" them, and with little engagement" (p. 4). While the study did not

impute causality, many disengaged students begin to skip school, critically affecting their achievement. Links with truancy discussed in Bridgeland et al. (2006) included the following: low grades, behavioral problems, lack of involvement in classes or school activities, pregnancy, fear of being held back as a result of low grades, student transfer to another school, and student transition from middle school to high school. Furthermore, students indicated that they could not keep up with the schoolwork and were not able to make up the necessary ground. When students were asked how the high school became too difficult to pass from one grade to the next, students indicated that in addition to the tests being too difficult, teachers were not available to give them extra help, reiterating that classes were uninteresting and that many of them had simply missed too many days to get caught up with their schoolwork. Many students (42% of the survey respondents) were disengaged from school because they spent time with those who were also disengaged. They were forced to attend school; they were not necessarily motivated and often did not deem the experience rewarding. Many indicated they would have liked to have someone to inspire them to stay in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Pierson (2013) concurred, "students don't learn from people they do not like" (p. 31). While numerous reasons can be cited for lack of a positive role model, one should consider the impact of a student's ability to culturally identify with educators. Perhaps, then, strong positive, culturally relevant influences could aid students in responsible decision-making because students often are unable to cope with the new- found freedom of high school and need help to navigate the situation. As Pierson (2013) noted, many students undoubtedly feel "Once you get into high school, you are on your own" (p. 8).

Who is at risk for dropping out, boys or girls? Does gender matter? Dropout rates illustrate the dangers of focusing too narrowly on a one-gender population. Dropout rates have

been declining for both girls and boys while the rates decreased for girls as a group. However, in order to present an objective sample of reducing high school dropout it was important to review gender bias from both perspectives, evidence that would support that gender matters as well as the reasons why students drop out of school, the interventions that were most likely to keep them in school, and what motivated them to learn.

The statistics were damaging when we reviewed the data collected to support the gender differences that exist. According to Dalton et al. (2009), in a national survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics "boys are more likely than girls to be expelled, suspended, or receive other disciplinary actions for behavioral issues. Just under one quarter (23%) of male students reported that they were suspended and 15% were expelled from school, compared with 9% and 3% of females, respectively" (pp. 21–22). The Schott Foundation for Public Education (2012) suggested that students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out of school by 10th grade than students who have never been suspended. Another reason that boys leave schools early is related to misbehaviors outside of school such as crimes related to property, drugs, theft, and assault, finally resulting in incarceration. The Center for Social Organization of Schools states the following:

> boys tend to get incarcerated for real crimes (drugs, stealing cars, gang violence) while girls may get arrested for petty theft, domestic disturbances even truancy which are more likely to trigger involvement with social services or truancy court that the juvenile justice system," enabling them unlike boys, to continue to attend school. (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 28)

African-American males are particularly vulnerable to being suspended or expelled: one in five African-American boys received out-of-school suspension compared with one in ten White males and one in ten African-American girls (U.S. Office for Civil Right, U.S. Department of Education, 2012). As the U.S. Office for Civil Rights reports, "African-American

students are over 3 ½ times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their peers who are White. Over 70% of students involved in school-related arrests or referred to law enforcement are Hispanic or African-American" (2012, p. 3). These statistics are reflective of a moderate portion of why students drop out of school; Rumberger (2011) in his book entitled *Dropping Out Why Students Drop Out of High School and What Can be Done About It* shared with readers an assortment of complexities which can be traced back to students' early experiences in school; these experiences are key factors as they are related to high school dropout, including those already mentioned.

The disengagement from school continues as described in Gates's survey that recalls the following common patterns: "they perceive the school as being unsupportive and/or irrelevant; they are not psychologically attached to school or invested in learning; they are more likely to be socially isolated and uninvolved in school-based social activities; and they are less likely to feel as though they have a sense of "belonging' to school" (Rumberger, 2011 pp. 151–153). Among students surveyed who had dropped out of school "just two fifths (41%) had someone in school to talk with about personal problems. More than three out of five (62%) said their school needed to do more to help students with problems outside of class" (Brideland et al., 2006, p. 5). The commonalities that exist for boys outside of school are shared equally by girls where their primary challenge is unprotected sexual encounters leading to unwanted pregnancies.

Among girls pregnancy is a leading risk factor for dropping out of school. According to the NCES survey, just over one quarter (28%) of females left school because of pregnancy, and 12% did so because of marriage or plans to marry, compared with 3% for males (American Civil Liberties Union, 2013, p. 4). Since 1972, with the enacted legislation of Title IX, it has been illegal for schools to exclude pregnant and parenting students from school. Despite this law

many of the girls from around the country tell the same stories: When they got pregnant or had a child, a principal, counselor, or teacher told them they'd have to leave school. More than any other group of high school dropouts, girls who leave due to pregnancy report that they would have stayed in school if they had received greater support from the adults at school. To that end, one might conclude, "When schools make an effort to support pregnant girls in their education, they can have a significant impact in lowering their dropout rates" (Mangel, 2010).

Being a young parent of a newborn or child while attending school creates significant barriers to staying on track for graduation. The NCES survey found that "roughly four times the number of female as male students indicated they dropped out of school because they became a parent (25% vs. 6.2%, respectively)" (NCES, 2009, p. 34). The Gates survey found that 33% of females who dropped out of school reported that becoming a parent played a major role in their decision to leave school, as opposed to 19% for males (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 6). In addition to parenting, caregiving responsibilities are placed upon the girls rather than boys. "Girls are more likely than boys to be expected to take care of the home, younger sibling, and/or older relatives when their parents are unable to do so themselves" (Bennett, MacIver, & Abele, 2010, p. 35). The gender gap does not exist when students attempted to leave the educational system to self-support, as a result of parenting demands. Although both boys and girls identified employment-related reasons for dropping out, the reasons tended to differ. Greater proportions of girls than boys work to "earn spending money or to pay for the expenses of parenting" (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 14).

Finally, a significant gender difference is one of sexual harassment, which occurs in classrooms across America. In a study conducted by the American Association of University Women acknowledged the fact that "girls were more than twice as likely as boys (44% vs. 20%)

to report that they feared being sexually harassed at school" ([AAUW], 2012, p. xx). More girls than boys feared that someone will hurt or bother them at school; this perception of fear discouraged them from going to school and fully participating in classes.

In classrooms with high numbers of ethnic minorities, boys and girls alike experienced inequities such as low standards, poor resources, and cultural insensitivity. These boys and girls are faced with markedly different situations from students of middle-class and high-income families. Gender equity is a low priority, and it is an almost non-existent worry at schools where teachers and administrators believe that the "real" problems are related to poverty (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 39). The obscenities that girls and boys subject themselves to are clearly illegal and away from those "less important" problems such as sexual harassment and sexist actions. In fact, among students who reported that they experienced sexual harassment at school, a greater percentage of girls than boys indicated that they

- did not want to go to school (30% vs. 15%, respectively),
- wanted to stay home from school or cut a class (22% vs 10%),
- did not talk as much in class (30% vs. 18%),
- found it hard to pay attention in school (24% vs. 15%),
- found it hard to study (20% vs. 9%), and
- doubted whether they have what it takes to graduate from high school (7% vs. 4%) (AAUW, 2001).

Selected research indicated that families of Latinas may be especially likely to keep their daughter(s) from going to school if they fear for their daughter's safety (Bennett et al., 2010, p. 39). A 1989 Women's Educational Equity Act (WEEA) study entitled "Female Dropouts: A New Perspective," reported the following:

> When people think of students who are most likely to dropout, they think first of disruptive boys, and then of pregnant girls. This stereotype does not reflect reality. Girls and boys drop out of school at approximately the same rate. Further, although 40 percent of girls who drop out are pregnant or getting married, the majority of girls who drop out are not. (Women's Educational Equity Act [WEEA], 1989, p.1)

The problems that female dropouts face are not new. However, while studies have proven that there are effective interventions programs, until there is an awareness of the gender inequities, it can be expected that the situation will worsen and the number of female (and male) dropouts will increase. The only way to decrease the number of dropouts is to become pro-active leaders and advocates for young women.

Why students drop out of high school—understanding poverty. As previously stated, socioeconomic status (or lack of) contributes to whether a student will drop out. Likewise, poverty has been linked to at-risk students and is often present in the circumstances surrounding drop-out (Cuthrell, Stapleton, & Ledford, 2010; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2011). The impact of poverty is compounded further, as one in every six children is poor in the United States; and one in every three Black children live in poverty (Children's Defense Fund, 2006, as cited in Cuthrell et al., 2010). Given this information, it is important that we understand the varying meanings of poverty that contribute, ultimately, to dropout, even if only indirectly.

Many American children live without having their basic needs met. Jenson (2009) defined poverty as "a chronic debilitating condition that results from multiple adverse risk factors and affects the mind, body and soul" (p. 6). Additionally, Jenson described six conditions that may contribute to one or more of the levels of poverty that children, families, and teachers confront:

> Situational poverty is generally caused by a sudden crisis or loss and is often temporary. Events causing situational poverty include environmental disasters, divorce, or severe health problems. Generational poverty occurs in families where at least two generations have been born into poverty. Families living in this type of poverty are not equipped with

> the tools to move out of their situations. Absolute poverty, which is rare in the United States, involves a scarcity of such necessities as shelter, running water, and food. Families who live in absolute poverty tend to focus on day-to-day survival. Relative poverty refers to the economic status of a family whose income is insufficient to meet its society's average standard of living. Urban poverty occurs in metropolitan areas with populations of at least 50,000 people. The urban poor deal with a complex aggregate of chronic and acute stressors (including crowding, violence, and noise) and are dependent on often-inadequate large-city services. Rural poverty occurs in nonmetropolitan areas with populations below 50,000. In rural areas, there are more single-guardian households, and families often have less access to services, support for disabilities, and quality education opportunities. (p. 6)

Poverty in any of the above forms may affect students, while some forms are more detrimental than others. Lack of support systems, limited role models, non-reinforcing relationships with teachers, and minimized mental resources due to lack of academic readiness are present. The above characterizations provide a basis to understand the role poverty plays in high school student attrition. This framework, coupled with significant demographics, including housing and social background of students and their families, provides a lens through which to view dropouts. The lack of educational motivation and aspiration is compounded by the reality of continued poverty and increased alienation. Additionally, noticeable social inequities intersect and overlap. For instance, even after equal rights legislation, African Americans are still not benefiting from the current educational system, yet, as a collective, they struggle almost more than any other group to instill the value and worth of a high school diploma or a college degree.

Theoretical contributions to understanding the non-traditional student. A number of theories help to understand the challenges and struggles of the non-traditional student. In the next section, I cover briefly the following theories: Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; John Dewey's Progressive Learning Theory; Lev Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development; William Glasser's Reality Theory; Laura Rendón's Self Validation Theory; Paulo Freire's Liberatory Pedagogy; Noddings Ethics of Care Model; Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm;

Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam's theories on social and cultural capital; and Bloom's Taxonomy. These theories provide a lens through which to examine the findings of this study.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, a theory in psychology, is based on five levels of needs in the lives of humans (Maslow, 1943). Although this theory has existed over half a century, the foundational tenets of his work still have relevance to the context in which non-traditional, impoverished students live. Because of the focus on basic needs, I have included a brief review of his theory. He viewed all needs as survival needs that are genetically built into humans. Physiology, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization describe the stages of growth in humans. Basic needs must be met before an individual can move into a higher level of other needs. He believed that learning could only occur when certain basic human needs were met. There is a comfortable and confident balance in life that presents the best opportunity, motivation, and environment for successful learning to occur (Maslow, 1943). Motivation of needs depends on the circumstances of the individual. When the needs of non-traditional students are met, they can then become motivated to learn, progress, and acquire the academic skills needed to be successful to compete on the college level. Academic success can aid in building self-esteem, potentially leading to self-actualization. If one of the basic needs becomes an issue of crisis, the individual then reverts to that basic level of need and, commonly, will remain there until the need is satisfied. Considering Maslow's theory, the researcher noted the benefits to revisiting these basic needs to determine if there were areas in which academia could better support students in their struggle to persevere; such a return could plausibly lead to success. Non-traditional students are especially fragile in the area of basic needs, due to issues resulting from needing transportation assistance, reliable childcare, financial and familial support, and the necessary academic skills to achieve; thus,

Maslow's theory is relevant in the analysis of student narratives relating to their academic experiences.

John Dewey's progressive learning theory. John Dewey (1938) believed that education was a necessity of life and realized its importance to our social existence. Education is not only the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. Dewey was critical of traditional and progressive education; that is, he saw challenges within both educational approaches because they lacked a carefully developed philosophy of experience. Dewey's progressive learning theory is based on the idea that people, even young people, are not just blank slates waiting to be filled with knowledge from kindergarten through college. Instead, Dewey suggested that students organize fact-based comprehension through meta-cognition, or by building onto prior experiences, preconceptions, and knowledge; therefore, it is the educator's role to create an educative experience. Given this theory of experience, Dewey argued that not all experiences are educative, and that, in fact, some experiences can be *miseducative*. The central challenge to experience-based learning is to create fruitful experiences and organize them in progression to guide students' learning. As a result Dewey felt that it is the educator's duty to ensure the quality of an experience.

Bohonos (2013) suggested that when we share the same basic understanding with a student, it is easier to collaborate on developing strategies and techniques and resources that would be of assistance to the student, which may be defined as developmental advising. Crookston's (1972) theory focused on the relationship between the student and advisor, as well as the role each plays. Bloom's (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008) appreciative advising approach

also emphasized the importance of relationships and the search for a holistic understanding of students.

These can be complemented nicely by an understanding of Vygotsky's (1978) "Zone of Proximal Development" theory, as well as of Dewey's (1938) emphasis on personal experiences. Vygotsky (1978) believed that each student operates within a range of ability and that educators would best facilitate learning by presenting students with work that challenges them without overwhelming them. If work is too easy, the student will be bored; if the work is too difficult, the student will not have the intellectual tools necessary to learn anything from attempting the work. Vygotsky's work focused on learning and cognitive development in children; however, his insights can be successfully adapted and applied to traditional and non-traditional college students. Vygotsky defined a good academic advisor as being proactive in working with students to assess college readiness. Vygotsky's theory recognized a student's potential for success, and in doing so, the advisor encourages the student to self-advocate to be allowed to follow through with personal academic plans of success.

Kincanon (2009) advocated an approach to advising that accounted for cultural as well as personal experience. Similarly, Freire (1971) suggested that collaborative learning results from respecting and valuing student input of past experiences. This model is complemented by a reading of Dewey (1938); in his work *Experience and Education* he emphasized the importance of previous experience and prior knowledge in the development of new understanding. Thus, educational advisors should consider a student's previous background as well as past life experience when providing academic guidance.

Glasser's reality theory. Glasser (2004) introduced reality therapy and developed its techniques in the mid-sixties as an American Psychiatrist. Reality therapy is a form of group

counseling that focuses on how people maintain and efficiently govern their lives. It places emphasis on moving beyond negative experiences without blaming or criticizing others and seeking to make its subject accountable for present and future decisions. Further, reality therapy hones in on how responsible choices can lead to more satisfying and healthy relationships with others. No matter what choices we have made or what we have done in the past, the present moment is essential to meeting our wants and needs in the future, and thus, instead of seeking a rationale or defense for unfounded or inconsistent behavior, individuals are taught to let go of past events, deal with the circumstances in their lives, and avoid destructive behaviors which harm or destroy important relationships. Glasser (2004) suggested that individuals who escape reality by behaving in inappropriate ways do not need to find a rationale and defense for their illogical behavior. Instead, people must be helped to acknowledge their behavior as being irresponsible and then to take action to make it more logical and productive. There are two major components of reality therapy: (a) creating a trusting environment and (b) using techniques to help individuals discover what they really want—to reflect on what they are doing now and create a new plan for fulfilling their goals more effectively in the future. Many non-traditional students come to college, needing a sense of direction and wanting guidance in a non-patronizing fashion. Some faculty and staff view certain kinds of students as incapable of learning, assault students with information and/or withhold information, instill doubt and fear in students, distance themselves from students, silence and oppress students, and/or create fiercely competitive learning environments that pit students against each other. Moreover, "this kind of no pain, no gain learning context greatly disadvantages non-traditional student populations such as working-class women and minorities" (Rendón, 1994, p. 644). Although some students, as a result of their past life experiences and knowledge of street life, are perfectly able to overcome

these potentially devastating and invalidating experiences through sheer determination and a will to succeed, many are not. Vulnerable students will respond by simply dropping out of college as they did high school.

Rendón's self-validation theory. Rendón's (1994) validation theory provides a framework that faculty and staff can employ to work with students in a way that gives them affirmation, self-worth, and liberation from past invalidation. The most vulnerable students will likely benefit from external validation that can serve as the means to move students toward developing internal strength, resulting in increased confidence in their ability to shape their own lives. Validation theory provides a theoretical framework to guide research that attempts to understand the college experience for low-income students, first-generation students, students of color, developmental education students, immigrant students, community college students, and international students (Astin & Astin, 2000; Barnett, 2011; Bustos, Riojas, Claeys, & Villarreal, 2007; Dandridge, 2002; Ezeonu, 2006; Gupton, Castelo, Martinez, & Quinatanar, 2007; Harvey, 2010; Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, & Miller, 2007; Pérez & Ceja, 2010; Rendón, 2002; Saggio & Rendón, 2004; Stein, 2006; Vasquez, 2007). Further, Rendón (1994) produces these key findings:

- Some students experience invalidation during their college experience. Examples of invalidating actions include faculty whose students believe their instructors and/or professors are unapproachable and inaccessible and often dehumanize their students.
- Academic validation can take multiple forms. For example, faculty, counselors, and advisers can affirm the real possibility that students can be successful college students. Faculty can also validate students' cultural experiences and voices in the classroom, provide opportunities for students to witness themselves as capable learners, and actively reach out to students to offer support and academic assistance.
- Faculty could benefit from training to provide academic and interpersonal validation for their students.
- Students benefit significantly from validation. They are proud when they are recognized as capable learners; such recognition allows them to develop a strong sense of confidence in themselves as students. They feel cared about when faculty and staff take the extra time to support them during difficult times.

- Employing validation does not mean that faculty needs to lower their academic expectations. (p. 20)

Programs that have supported the validation theory have created academic environments in which all students (regardless of gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, physical ability, or socioeconomic background) can thrive. Specific models that have been identified as being extremely supportive and successful for students of particular cultural heritages are as follows: community cultural wealth model, liberatory pedagogy model, and ethic of care model. The community cultural wealth model is described by Yosso (2005); it employs a critical race theory framework to challenge deficit-based perspectives that view all low-income students as marginal, possessing limited social, educational, and cultural assets. Instead, Yosso (2005) viewed low-income students from an asset perspective and theorizes that students may possess at least one and often multiple forms of capital. This capital may be categorized as follows:

1. aspirational (referring to student hopes and dreams),
2. linguistic (speaking more than one language),
3. familial (ways of knowing in immediate and extended family),
4. social (significant others who provide support),
5. navigational (ability to maneuver institutional structures), and
6. resistance (ability to recognize and challenge inequities). (Yosso, 2005, p. 23)

Liberatory pedagogy. Liberatory pedagogy suggested that scholars such as Paulo Freire (1971) and Laura I. Rendón (2009) have advanced the notion that education must transcend the banking model, in which knowledge is simply deposited in students' minds and faculty operate at a distance from students. A liberatory pedagogy model allows teachers and students to be holders and beneficiaries of knowledge. As a result of an ethic of care, compassion, and validation, faculty and staff can liberate oppressed students from self-limiting views about their ability to learn and help students find their voice and self-worth. Ultimately, the liberatory pedagogy model has the potential to transform faculty and students who break away from

conventional ways of teaching and learning. Students can begin to define themselves as competent college students and find their sense of purpose and voice (Rendón, 2009).

Ethic of care model. The ethic of care model represented a core of validation that authenticates caring, nurturing, and general concern. Noddings (1984) and Valenzuela (1999) expressed concern that many schools are focused on detachment, impersonal and objective language, and non-personal content. These forms of invalidation can lead students to believe that who they are and what they represent are not valued. Moreover, validation has emerged as a viable theory that can be employed to better serve and understand the success of underserved students, ultimately to improve teaching and learning in order to understand student development in college. The implementation of the validation theory will help faculty to work compassionately with students as whole human beings who can best function within an ethic of care and support, while transforming underserved students into powerful learners who overcome past invalidations of oppression.

Walter Fisher and narrative paradigm. Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm was drawn from theories of learning, education, and communication development. It sought to provide a description of non-traditional students that is concerned with and framed by student experiences and how those experiences are processed, expressed, and performed by mind, body, spirit, and voice. Moreover, this theory presented a phenomenology of sensitivity that suggested support for student actions and reactions, offering a window into the social fabric and interactivity that binds student life and campus culture. As a result of the life experiences of many non-traditional students, especially those who come from urban backgrounds, stories of survival are often probed and questioned or treated as being unbelievable to the point of being dishonest. To

understand the impact this experience has on non-traditional students, one must first understand what stories mean to people and why they are important to the social fabric of education.

Walter Fisher (1978) defined narration as symbolic actions, words, and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. He believed that all communication is a form of storytelling, and, moreover, the study of narrative is the study of the way humans experience the world. This general concept is refined into the view that education and educational research constructs and reconstructs personal and social stories; learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. Fisher (1978) adamantly redefined a new paradigm to include (a) people are essentially storytellers, (b) we make decisions on the basis of good reasons, (c) history, biography, culture, and character determine what we consider good reasons, (d) narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories, and (e) the world is a set of stories from which we choose and recreate our lives. To that end, Fisher's work shed light on the importance of the non-traditional student's experience. When people study narrative, they are studying the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual worlds of themselves, including stories and narratives as they are conceived by non-traditional students in academia.

At an early age in the United States, many students become high school drops as a result of the poverty that exists in urban America. Fisher (1978) suggested that all humans are natural storytellers and their decisions regarding these stories are based on "good reasons." Thus, the narratives of non-traditional students offer a window into understanding educational experiences as well as the role education plays in students' lives. Today, more than at any other time in history, demographics of college and university students in the United States are experiencing rapid and profound changes, with increases in non-traditional student enrollment that comes with

drastic problems with retention. In the end, understanding why our children drop out of school at an early age and reenter our educational systems as non-traditional students might require an understanding of how that narrative storyline was shaped and lived out.

Moreover, what is highlighted in this research is the story of poverty and the way poverty has been linked to at-risk students. The story of poverty is often present in the circumstances surrounding drop-outs (Cuthrell et al., 2010; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2011). Many American children live without having their basic needs met. Poverty in any of the above forms may affect students, but some forms are more detrimental than others. Furthermore, Payne (2005, as cited by Cuthrell et al., 2010) acknowledged nine value sources whose increased or decreased levels attenuate poverty. Those sources are financial resources,emotional resources, mental resources, spiritual resources, physical resources, support systems, relationships, role models, and knowledge of hidden rules (p. 46).

Poverty appears as a central result of a number of separate, but convergent factors. It has even been described as one of America's human rights violations, creating a microcosm of homelessness, violence, and dispersion within inner city lifestyles. Payne presented a critical analysis relative to the phenomenology of poverty, while other contemporary scholars, particularly those viewed through the lens of African American activists—including Angela Y. Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, and Stephanie B. Collins—emphasize environmental factors, such as economic depressions or extended unemployment (as cited in Hill, 1998). What becomes clear is that there is a complicated model at work, characterized not only by a lack of financial resources but also one driven by a complex web of factors: emotional resources, mental resources, spiritual resources, physical resources, support systems, relationships, role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. The following profile presented by Payne, reflects the cosmetic

makeup of poverty, the groups or frames that are used to classify which individuals are in need of additional assistance. Included more often than not are the elderly, single mothers and incarcerated males. A majority of these recipients are single mothers attempting to seek a better way of life by acquiring their GED and postsecondary degree. Large portions of single mothers are financially subsidized by a number of social welfare programs such as Medicaid, food stamps, housing, and educational benefits. As underserved populations these young women commonly utilize the social welfare system as an opportunity to escape the ravages of poverty. Although financial assistance can help to escape poverty, single mothers maintain limited knowledge of how to navigate the financial system, including those having to do with student loans.

One of the major reasons is that many rules for obtaining what these single mothers need are simply hidden from plain sight. Financial experts and professionals are not always readily available to answer their questions or understand their predicament. To further the burden, many single mothers lack positive role models who have navigated the educational system before, or for that matter, have a support system that encourages success in the unfamiliar transition into educational spaces. Commonly, these educational spaces are environments that are tied to previous negative educational histories and/or conceptions of teaching and learning that are unjust or unfair. Many studies also point to young mothers who are forced to drop out of college as a result of a family crisis, leaving them in financial debt without achieving their personal goals of academic success (Adair, 2008). Adding insults to injury, the emotional resources, which serve as a means for navigating the art of conflict resolution, are more often than not unavailable or unlearned, leaving these students unable to communicate the pain of an injustice. It should not be surprising then that violence is regularly associated with a lack of emotional resources

when communication breaks down and the voices of these young adults go unnoticed or are repeatedly muted and/or silenced. The challenges of these students start long before orientation, registration, or the first day of classes. Most of them continued to be stressed out about other issues in addition to returning to school. More specially, regarding school, are the fears about not fitting in as a student (e,g., age, differing life stages, history of not being successful in their initial educational experience, and a history of low grades). Positive self-evaluation and commitment to the student role have been predictors of participation in the learning process, overall achievement, and persistency (graduation rates) (Chartnad, 1990). Thus, identifying and resolving common concerns of this population is important for their academic success.

> Often times, single mothers come into school requesting transportation assistance, childcare, domestic violence, hunger, and clothes, and shoes for their children. Most of these women pay tuition and fees from student loans, but they struggle to cover everyday expenses and keep their families afloat until they graduate. They have already cut their household expenses to the bone, canceling cable, internet, and home phone, stretching the pantry staples to the last crumb, even shutting off the gas as soon as the temperature inches above freezing. Yet despite these sacrifices, they still struggle to make ends meet. (Whitmer, 2012, p.1)

Many of our single mothers receive food stamps before starting school, only to find themselves ineligible once they become college students. Though the rule was originally put in place to prevent more traditional students from taking advantage of aid they really didn't need, it often puts an added and unexpected strain on the finance of non-traditional students who are already struggling.

That is, when the community resources coordinator is introduced to this population with available resources in the community, that might be helpful to these students with various obstacles, they are confronted with that student's path to a new future. Community resource advocates are equipped to make referrals, assisting these students in accessing meaningful social networks. While the services offered by community agencies are in no means a magic bullet for

retention, as far as keeping our students in school and helping them to achieve, they hold the potential to provide a strategic human service system that could keep these women functional**.** However, these same agencies that provide resources don't always follow through with the assistance they have offered or the services are not implemented in a timely manner.

While community resources exist, it is often the student's personal attitude about using designated recourses that is the key to their success. In the majority of cases, the single mother or abused victim must independently follow-up with these resources in order to access their services, and many students are too overwhelmed, too proud, or too entrenched in a culture of entitlement to put forth the kind of effort required to ameliorate their needs. What has just been described is what happens outside the classroom once a female decides to reenter the postsecondary educational system. Internally, the stress is replicated with psychosocial challenges within the classroom along with the campus culture. As a result of feminism, there has been considerable attention paid to women, gender, and ethnicity; however, a great deal of the research on women and gender issues has been limited to White, middle-class women.

It is also worth noting that women are not all the same. They are often lumped into other groupings that transcend gender categories. In fact, women are commonly separated by class, race, ethnicity, religion, politics and culture; thus, statistical information and wide spread generalizations about them as a population may not directly apply to women of color. As Imel (1995) notes, the socialization of disadvantaged women in and of their diverse communities cannot simply be the same as that of women from a higher or more advantaged class; for this reason, many women are unfairly represented in the disadvantaged.

Therefore, it is important that we attempt to guarantee inclusion of educational programs that may provide the relevant emotional support for women of color and underserved populations

in their voyage to obtain a better life through academic achievement. These special populations of disadvantaged students of color are often being victimized and disappointed by primary social services systems. As was detailed in Benshoff and Lewis (1992) "student services most often implemented for adults were counseling-and career related. Services that adults considered important (but which were least often available to them) included health services, publications for adults, and qualified staff to work with non-traditional students" (p. 3). To that end, then, college must offer more than just classes:

> social activities appropriate for both older students and their families. It is for this reason that faculty and staff must be creative in communicating with non-traditional students who commute and attend school part-time, especially since these students are usually of a different age and prefer different kinds of activities. Moreover, too, non-traditional students usually lack resources in their community or emotional support from family or friends to attend or be present for on-campus events or activities. In fact, "research has shown that non-traditional students have needs that differ from those of traditional age students" and that "the willingness of institutions to modify existing programs and develop new serveries geared to adult populations will have a positive impact on their ability to attract, serve, and satisfy the educational needs of non-traditional students. (Benshoff & Lewis, 1992, p. 3)

With regard to male non-traditional students, the literature remains sparse. Muench (1987), in a comparative study of the psychosocial needs of adult men and women students in adult degree programs, found that both sexes experienced fears of failure and self-doubt. Men, however, were thought to have suffered more from lack of self-confidence while women experienced more guilt. Among non-traditional students studied by Bauer and Mott (1990), the following was noted:

- Men were changing careers while women were looking to advance within the same career field;
- Women more than men experienced competing pressures of child care, financial, and school responsibilities;
- Men more than women tended to be frustrated about loss of time and money in returning to school. (p. 4)

Today, more than at any other time in history, demographics of college and university students in the United States are experiencing rapid and profound changes. Along with these increases in non-traditional student enrollment comes an increasing percentage of working non-traditional college students with a multitude of commitments that serve to create barriers to their educational success: "Helping students develop integrity and strength of character that prepares them for leadership may be one of the most challenging and important goals of higher education" (King, 1997). Increasingly, higher education is being turned to as a source for potential change, given its significant role in developing leadership capacity among today's non-traditional students (Astin, 1993; Astin & Astin, 2000; Morse, 1989, 2004). In many respects, non-traditional, young adult learners are juggling jobs and family while attending classes part-time and working full time; they are the faces that represent a growing number of young men and women in postsecondary higher education.

Nurturing and mentoring beyond academic advisement play a sufficient role in relationship building among our non-traditional students. This is especially prominent among our minority female students. In her landmark study "Within Our Reach," Lisbeth Schorr (1988) pointed out that for many such female students, family breakups represent a major aspect of their lives, leaving them divorced and abandoned and the sole support for their children. Many of these students have little stability in their lives, have very busy schedules, and are very often accompanied by their children to college classes. Nutrition and healthcare also continue to be major challenges for nearly all urban students. A typical lunch often consists of pizza and chicken wings, washed down with a soft drink and followed by dessert and a cigarette for stress relief. These identical challenges mirror the faces of even younger adult learners who have or are returning to GED programs to attempt a new start at improving their lives, as well as their

economic status. These are the students that I attempt to support by helping them replace the broken dreams and/or poor decisions of their past with hope, encouragement, and the reality of journeying beyond a GED to a higher level of accomplishment by obtaining an associate's degree. The Pre-Collegiate Academy will serve as a new construction site and rite of passage from the Pathways to Success Program. The Pre-Collegiate Academy will create a suspension bridge to the doorways of opportunity by establishing an association and link to the present college culture.

Hidden within the silence of non-traditional students is important data illuminating the living conditions of their lives. Bernheimer (2000) discovered a shocking degree of stress among sixteen women attending community college during the interviewing process for the researcher's doctoral studies. Every woman was coping with the pressures of work, studies, family responsibility, financial concerns, transportation problems, and illness. During a three month period one woman was hospitalized with pneumonia, another was ill with diabetes, one woman's cousin was murdered, another woman postponed an interview due to problems with a social worker, one woman's husband died, another woman was still recovering from her 16 year old son being shot and killed two years ago, and one woman was having difficulty keeping her job in a child care center due to time she spent in jail. The women were lacking social and economic support systems and labored under tremendous daily stress. Their stories teach us that the classroom is a place where people care, the truth is honored, and learning is intimately connected to real life. In doing so, students are introduced to Bloom's Taxonomy, but not only within the class room setting; they also filter the substance of the taxonomy through their actual lived experiences as they attempt to resolve and problem solve their activities of daily living. The integration of Bloom's Taxonomy inside and outside of the classroom additionally affords

students the opportunity to practice the levels of understanding associated with the following levels of learning.

Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam: Poverty, privilege, and social capital. In the past two or three decades scholars have taken an interest in three different perspectives on social capital based on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam. Each is distinct in its own definition, but for purposes of viewing poverty and privilege and how these various definitions relate to the factors for why African American high school dropouts continue to be excluded from the inner-circle of accomplishing success, Bourdieu and Coleman examined why exclusivity exists the way it does. As it is explained by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), who proposed the term of social capital in his attempt to distinguish it from economic and cultural capital, it emerges as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). Therefore, social capital recognizes the performativity of social stratification in a class system. It addresses primarily the ways in which society is reproduced and how dominant classes retain their position because of their position in the social structure. Although distinct from economic capital, and operating in a different way, it is essential to understand that social capital is ultimately inseparable from economic capital, much the way Payne emphasized the interconnection among the nine factors of poverty.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) attempted to address the social inequity caused by the levels of people's ownership of cultural capital by describing groups with advantaged cultural backgrounds, which mirror their resources of economic capital. Moreover, these privileges grant them more access to resources, particularly material resources, but also social or non-material

ones, such as insider information or knowledge (Field, 2003). Here, social capital shields the elite, deployed to ensure that the *wrong* kind of people don't enter particular social circles, by creating a kind of force field of insider knowledge of social mores and taboos unknown to outsiders (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Researchers have defined social capital from a perspective that uses social capital as a lens through which they analyze social norms, rules, and social trust (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Portes, 1998; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). James Coleman (1988), an educational expert, described the effect of social capital as "persons' actions are shaped, redirected, constrained by the social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organization are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy" (p. 96). A description such as that of Coleman markedly includes characteristics of dense grouping, showing how norms reinforce shared beliefs and trust, which makes social capital productive as human beings act out (perform) their roles within certain social contexts and locations in the social structure. Coleman (1988) proposed a model in which social capital is one of the potential resources which "an actor (performer) can use, alongside other resources such as their own skills and expertise (human capital), tools (physical capital), or money (economic capital); however, social capital is not necessarily owned by the individual, but, instead, it arises as a resource which is available to them, as a privilege" (p. 96). Notably, these kinds of social contexts produce group assets where members can perform under the normative expectations of their discourse community without realizing the same social contexts are not available to other groups (Dika & Singh, 2002). The following is helpful as we expand to view the normative perspectives in education, for one of the major strengths of social capital theory lies in its ability to analyze the processes of educational attainment and academic achievement.

Bloom's Taxonomy. One of the primary methods of teaching in the classroom is that of using Bloom's Taxonomy, also referred to as Levels of Thinking and Learning (Bloom, Engelhart, & Committee of College and University Examiners, 1956). This is simply a way of explaining the stages at which we all acquire and process information. These levels progress from simple learning and thinking—levels 1, 2, and 3 (remembering, understanding, and applying), to more complex learning and thinking— levels 4, 5, 6 (analyzing, evaluation, and creating). Bloom's Taxonomy helps students understand the different levels of learning and application for every course they take (Sherfield & Moody, 2013).

Summary. The students in this study presented a powerful narrative. The data is influential in that it conveyed an emotional perception of lives fraught with challenges. The power of these narrative reflections and the lack of preparedness to effectively engage non-traditional students should be exposed as it is demonstrated in higher education. This study enhanced the internalization of messages that these students are given, both real and perceived. But, most importantly, the power of this narrative explored the central question of this research: What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their post-secondary education at proprietary colleges? The findings of this research resulted in the beginning of an understanding of this special population, their experiences and learning, as well as strategies to increase higher education responsiveness and, perhaps, even retention. The cultural background information of these students and their families and how the dominant cultural and social norms fail to acknowledge their experiences and capacities will play a salient role in understanding why children drop out of school.

Students with these backgrounds represent the current population of non-traditional students, not just in the United States, but also from a global perspective. Further, my goal was

to uncover the process of how non-traditional students—particularly minority students living in low-income urban communities—cope, adjust, and interact within an educational system that has not provided fair and equitable treatment. How do we provide corrective action for this generation of children that have such negative reflections of lived experiences? Many of these students fail to identify the negativity, which continues to oppress their psychological growth and development, occurring as a result of social capital, everyday racism, and social economical classism demonstrated in the narratives of the culture.

Although students need to master their academic skills, they must heal from the various forms of marginalization that confront them on a daily basis. Their anger and feelings of inferiority must be balanced with a personal validation of self-worth. In conclusion, it becomes paramount for educators and administrators to analyze students' cultural beliefs and norms and find ways to integrate them in curricula and student programming. Additionally, counseling and support systems must become more inclusive of students with diverse backgrounds in attempts to offer services with which all students can find identity. Dyson (2004) called on all of us to reexamine ingrained beliefs that often spring from cultural myths with no basis in fact. Indeed, such an act can lessen the effects of all isms and provide hope for marginalized students everywhere, but, further, it may also shed light on important characteristics of postsecondary educational proprietary or for-profit institutions and their roles in educating non-traditional students.

Part II: Characteristics of postsecondary educational proprietary or for-profit institutions. This section of the literature review provides an historical background of the for-profit colleges, their workings within today's society. A growing number of non-traditional students are attracted to the for-profit sector because they are able to complete their education

within a shorter period of time and, therefore, enter the workforce earlier. Because non-traditional students are older than typical students entering directly from high school, their personal lives are more complex. The majority of non-traditional students are single women who have children and are employed on a full or part-time basis.

The precursors of for-profit education date back to the 15th century. During the 1400s as Western Europe was experiencing great strides in education and exploration, increased appreciation of the arts and formal scholarship made learning accessible not only to the wealthy but also to the pauper (Bremer et al., 2013). While the wealthy students were able to enroll in rhetoric, philosophy, arithmetic, geometry and astrology, others took advantage of trade apprenticeships (Giroux, 1988). Economic flourishing necessitated training in other areas of education and skilled labor. One seminal example was Friar Luca Pacioli's mathematical book titled *Everything About Arithmetic, Geometry, and Proportions*. The book included a section on double entry accounting and was the only accounting text that was used until the 16th century (Giroux, 1988). The text's widespread acceptance provided a novel way of disseminating practical knowledge to wider audiences than before: instructors could purchase the text and then provide practical application in a classroom setting for a fee. There were no philosophical theories involved, just formal learning with applied techniques to be used in the workplace. According to Giroux (1988) "Pacioli's text gave him the reputation for being the father of accounting, and it also opened the door to an educational change. This change would be later referred to as for profit education" (p. 1).

The aforementioned change provided the foundation for what are known today as the for-profit or proprietary colleges. Although the structure of these institutions has evolved since the 1400s, the overall premise of their mission still holds true. Proprietary colleges provide an

alternative to traditional education by offering practitioner-taught, flexible, market-driven courses that meet the needs of the target populations. Target markets are determined by a variety of factors, including economic and technological developments in the labor force, changing needs within an institution's surrounding communities, and various demographic factors that will be discussed below. Curriculum reflects these needs as well and is designed to meet the practical and immediate needs of the student. The subsequent subsections provide a brief history of proprietary schools in the United States, followed by the attributes of proprietary schools found in the literature. Finally, emergent themes discovered through the reading will be discussed.

Overview of proprietary education in the United States. For-profit education has recently come under attack for multiple reasons. At issue are high tuition, student Federal loan and grant repayment obligations for students who do not graduate or may not succeed in winning good jobs, poor student outcomes, and career placement. As Mathew McGuire (2012) stated in his article "Subprime Education: For Profit Colleges and the Problems with Title IV Federal Student Aid," the money issues actually do not lie with the schools, but with the Federal Government Title IV. Title IV was established to provide Federal funds to financially eligible students to allow them to continue their education. Eligibility for such funds is available to students attending private, public, or for-profit institutions. If the tuition funding is tightened, the educational opportunity will also be restricted.

The for-profit sector is diverse in that it ranges from trade schools such as beauty culture, pet grooming, or truck driving schools to colleges and universities. However, the controversies surrounding the for-profit education have always existed. To fully understand the controversy, the for-profit concept and its history must be understood. For-profit education is not a new concept. It is believed that this type of educational system originated during the Italian

Renaissance in 1400. With the oral tradition setting the educational foundation before that time period, higher education was only for those from wealthy families. This obviously created disparities and inequities but also widened a social gap leading to systemic implications. A unique arena, for-profit colleges remained surrounded by both public (state schools) and private (quite often religious or ethnic) schools with the common perception that the goals and the missions of each were somewhat similar. However, because for-profit schools acknowledge making money, there has been a sinister shadow cast upon their work and scholarship so it is important to further delve into the role that for-profit education plays.

Many educators do believe for-profit schools fill an important void. It is estimated that seven million adult students are currently enrolled in various higher educational institutions in the United States (Cohen & Brawer, 2003). These adult students represent approximately 50% of the total number of students enrolled. The majority of these adult students prefer career programs at two-year community colleges or career colleges while the remaining wish to complete a four-year degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2003).

Within the United States proprietary colleges are estimated to number 7,550. Researchers state that this education system was designed to provide training to individuals in urban areas. Normal schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries not only welcomed women, members of minority groups, and students with other non-typical characteristics, but also included them in a rich intellectual and social community and encouraged them to reach beyond their underprivileged backgrounds (Ogren, 2003). As a result, this was the beginning of what we know today as the skilled trades of industry (Tierney, 2011). Historically, proprietary schools prepared students for an occupation, trade, or vocation. Programs were established in plumbing, restaurant management, art and design, cosmetology, paralegal work, and

self-directed skills working as laborers. Initially, tuition for these programs was quite low, providing a rather generous opportunity for the customer, who in turn learned specific skills in exchange, that later led directly to increasing the workforce.

Approaches to for-profit education differed greatly amongst educators. Known more prominently for his trailblazing work in civil rights, African-American educator Booker T. Washington spent most of his life associated with the education of African Americans during the years 1880–1915. Washington realized that his typical student was well over 19 years old, leading him to pioneer the idea of the "movable school" (Moreland & Goldenstien, 1985, p. 127). The movable school would bring classes to those who needed training in the practical skills of farming. Though Washington was educated in the liberal arts at Hampton Institute, during his last year of college, his classes included practical instruction in moral sciences, agriculture, and homemaking. Similar to the approach taken by early European educators mentioned previously, Washington understood the importance of providing a formal yet practical approach to learning. Thus, the typical student learned and took advantage of on-the-job training at the school and was paid for his services. This gainful employment in practical skills enabled the students to earn tuition money. This approach confirmed Washington's emphasis on the wisdom concerning the importance of a well-rounded education.

School choice. Jones (1973) asserted, "Proprietary school recruiting efforts are not directed towards students who want to find themselves, but are directed towards students with a specific career goal" (p. 2). Belitsky (1970) explained it as "a basic mutuality of interest" (p. V), whereby proprietary schools respond to the incentives associated with the sale of goods and services, and the students respond to the incentive of highly practical, job-oriented training. The above statements are very pragmatic in nature, and, no doubt, provide an explanation of the

initial attraction. However, as educational methods have changed and progressed over time, research has revealed a number of other reasons why students ultimately choose a proprietary institution over a more traditional college setting. In informal interviews conducted by Kincaid and Podesta (1966) the following was found:

- students were pleased with course content and time convenience,
- students liked the fact that they could begin classes immediately and the course length is directly related to the course content itself,
- students liked the practically oriented placement service, and
- students enjoyed the relaxed classroom atmosphere and criticized their previous schooling for its impractical nature.

Wilms (1976) found that minority and other disadvantaged students preferred private, career schools over nearby public institutions that offered the same training at a fraction of the cost. These findings led Wilms to speculate that minority and other disadvantaged young adults might perceive public postsecondary schools as being an extension of the academic, middle-class, public secondary school system, and, therefore, would not be attracted to them. This speculation by Wilms is important. If Wilms is correct, his speculation provides an additional dimension to school choice decisions. Consequently, researchers and educators appear to believe that postsecondary school choice is based on the student trying to obtain a particular goal: a degree or, perhaps, and end result or even additional training to get a promotion or pay increase. The idea that some students may base their postsecondary school choice upon avoidance of previously undesirable secondary school experiences adds to the importance of this research. In another study by Apling and Aleman (1990), students attending private career schools cited the reputation of the school, availability of desired bloocourses, financial aid, and job placement as

related reasons for choosing their school. A survey of 10,000 students already attending a school accredited by the National Association of Trade and Technical Schools (NATTS), formed in 1965, found that 89% were satisfied with their courses, 87% were satisfied with their teachers, and 80% would recommend the school to a friend (Downes, 1991).

A quantitative dissertation study by David A. DuBois (1991) considered six factors with a goal of determining their influence on a student's decision to attend a proprietary college:

1. Admissions Procedures and Policies
2. Suitability of Programmatic and Institutional Characteristics
3. School Reputation and Recommendations by Family, Friends and Others,
4. Cost and Financial Aid
5. Friendly and Caring Atmosphere
6. Expectations of employment and ability to work while enrolled in college. (p. 88)

Each of the criteria was scaled and scored from high priority/extremely important (score of 5) to not relevant/not important (score of 1). Consistent with the Downes' (1991) study, the students related suitability of programs as most important with a mean score of 4.209 and influence of recommendations as least important with a mean score of 2.257. Contrary to what we might have expected DuBois to find, it is important to note that he found cost/financial aid and job placement to be third and fourth, respectively, in importance.

In a project undertaken at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research, organizational variables were studied to better understand how a college's 86 organizational environments could be more supportive of non-traditional students (Glenn, 2004). The study involved detailed interviews with 86 students and 96 administrators and faculty at seven public community colleges and seven private occupational institutions (four for-profit, three non-profit). The research focused on two questions: "What do the schools think they offer?" and "How do students actually experience these programs?" The following organizational environments/structures were identified:

- One-stop shopping: Prospective students at the private institutions would often enroll, register, and apply for federal financial aid by working with a single person in a single afternoon. Students at the public colleges, however, frequently described frustrating and confusing trips to several different offices.
- Predictable class schedules and streamlined curricula: Low-income students often face an array of demands from jobs and family members. They are much more likely to complete an associate's degree, if they can be confident of what courses they are required to take and that their courses will be offered in a regular sequence at convenient times of the day and evening. Students at the public colleges often reported that classes had been canceled at the last minute, or that some of their required courses had been offered at night, but others during the day.
- Low counselor-student ratios: Because the private colleges' accreditation partly depends on their graduation and job placements rates, the institutions closely monitor their students' progress. Students at the public community colleges, by contrast, sometimes reported that they had registered for inappropriate classes or missed important requirements, and did not find out about these mistakes until months later. (Glenn, 2004, p. 4)

Although this research is not claiming that private institutions are better than public colleges, it does suggest that some of the structures that the study identified in the private institutions could be well worth emulating (Glenn, 2004). As we continue to unfold who attends for-profit institutions, veterans of previous wars and those returning from war experiences find this particular culture of postsecondary education rewarding (Ross-Jones, 2006).

After World War II, The Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944 (G.I. Bill) was intended to help military servicemen to integrate into the post WWII economy and society. According to Bohanon (2012) "The hardships of the previous fifteen years of war and depression were replaced by rising living standards, increased opportunities, and a newly emerging American culture" (p. 1). It is estimated that 40% of the retuning soldiers took advantage of the available federal money. This occurrence changed the future of the solider, the future of education, and the demographic of the student (Swail, 2003, p. 9). Although it was not generally accepted as part of the mainstream higher education arena, the nature of the shortened and practical curriculum offered by the proprietary schools gained great popularity with the working

classes and finally gained legitimacy during the 1940s with the passage of the G.I. bill, which funded many service men to attend proprietary institutions. In fact "more than five thousand proprietary schools were organized in the first five years after the war" (Bohanon, 2012, p. 3); however, it was not until proprietary students were able to use money from gurarantеed student loans that enrollemnt and other data were gathered and included in higher education studies (Cohen, 1998, p.194).

In the late sixties, students enrolled in career or technical colleges numbered approximately 22,000, compared to the seven million students attending degree-granting institutions in the United States. These schools were mostly unaccredited, seeking no federal or state financing. Tierney (2011) noted the dramatic change in federal regulations as a result of the increased popularity of online education and its growth and development. Samford and Shirvaikar (2010), as cited by Mantel (2011), provided this classification of proprietary schools: "(1) Online Schools, the fastest growing; (2) Bricks-and-Clicks, which offer a mix of campus-based and online programs leading to associate, bachelor's and advanced degrees; and (3) Vocational Schools, which offer primarily campus-based associate-degree and certificate programs*"* (pp. 2–3).

Attributes of for-profit institutions: Market driven education. Although for-profit and non-for-profit institutions seek to offer post-secondary education to students for a fee, the mission, culture, motivations, methods of governance, and outcomes differ when it comes to execution (Abelman, Dalessandro, Jansotva, & Snyder-Suhy, 2007). Traditional, not-for-profit post-secondary institutions have long championed academic excellence and achievement, social capital earned through lineal patronage, placement and ranking in scholastic hierarchy, and

research and knowledge creation. Thus, the institutional frameworks have been orchestrated to support these foci.

In contrast, as the name suggests, for-profit institutions have the major concern of finding the balance between scholastics and profit generation. Many are owned by publicly traded companies and offer flexibility, accessibility, and on-demand curriculum (Abelman et al., 2007; Mays, 2012; McGuire, 2012). It lends that such organizations are market driven, similar to other businesses and, consequently, approach education from an alternative perspective. The following sections will review the literature with the aim of understanding the attributes of proprietary schools. Subsections include Customer Service Orientation and Practical Approach to Education.

Recruitment. Abelman et al. (2007) argued that the customer-service orientation has always governed for-profit schools, taking great care to describe their services to prospective students. McGuire (2012) explained that students see education as a product and, themselves, as consumers; likewise, for-profit institutions share this ideology (p. 131). For-profit colleges see growth strategies as important since increased and continued enrollment aids the profit driven model and revenues come from tuition. Hence, they readily seek avenues to attract new applicants such as easy admission, in-demand programs, and outreach to underserved populations. Seiden (2009) suggested that viewing students as customers is a tremendous attraction to recruit and retain those customers. Degree programs and curricula were market-driven. Cellini (2012) looked at the supply-side of for-profit education, citing that institutions seek to lower costs while being competitive in their offerings (p. 3).

Flexibility. Given the customer-driven orientation of the for-profit school, researchers find that the environment and culture is much more accommodating to students than the

traditional nonprofit school. Most schools have an on-the-spot admissions process where students can visit and be enrolled in the same day. Students can often enroll in courses around their existing schedules or in time-blocked intervals. Much of the governance in student affairs is decentralized, offering very little impediment between students and the administration or management that governs them. Consequently, students have considerable accessibility when needing additional support. Kinser (2006) found that institutions follow an open door policy and strict and prompt communication standards when addressing student concerns. Kinser cautioned, however, that such flexibility does not equate to "the customer is always right." Most schools require strict adherence to attendance policies, enforce student codes of conduct, and quickly address breaches of such.

Student support services. Kinser (2006) described how proprietary schools approach student affairs: "For-profit institutions tend to focus on academic support, admissions, advising, career services, financial aid, and retention programs; while traditional student affairs often include areas such as athletics, counseling, health services, residential life, and student activities as well" (p. 267). Kinser also mentioned that some for-profits allow students to create career-related clubs and/or establish charters to professional organizations. Abelman et al. (2007) performed a content analysis on the language used in vision statements of colleges and universities and found that of the career colleges who referenced support services, "43% pertained to career planning and 14% pertained to academic advising" (p. 1). Likewise, Kinser (2006) stated, "Because they are tuition-driven institutions, for-profits generally have well-developed student services related to enrollment, academic advising, and career support. To be blunt, students represent revenue" (p. 1).

Practical approach to education. A practical education, with a focus on the crafts and trades, has always been an important aspect of the educational process. Many students who were not able to take advantage of the liberal arts curriculum still desired wage-paying skills. Each generation faces the challenge of survival for themselves and their families. Many students have come to the realization that, though life will not require them to complete a four year college liberal arts or professional degree, they do need additional and continual training to provide for their families. The students who most frequently select the practical career or for-profit education are those students who feel that a four year course of study would be too expensive and time consuming, have had issues with completing high school, and are women or single parents. Coupled with this diverse student body is the fact that the for-profit college trimester curriculum is different from the September to June traditional academic calendar. It consists of three semesters that continue through the summer months. This calendar accelerates the education completion process.

Traditional college and universities also may not offer core subjects during evening hours or weekends. In addition to the trimester year, many for-profit courses are also available after 6 pm, at the end of the typical workday, as well as during weekends. Another important consideration in the growth of the for-profit educational system is that the majority of the traditional colleges and universities are increasing their tuition annually. Today's college education may be the student's greatest investment beyond the purchase of a home. College education is also closely related to economic advancement. However, the current generation faces tuition increases that have occurred at a faster rate than housing, services, and wages (Carlson, 2009, p. 1).

Rearchers posit that proprietary schools approach education from a practical standpoint, one much different from their nonprofit counterparts (Abelman et al., 2007; Cellini, 2012; Mantel, 2011). Tierney (2011) described the absence of tenured faculty and academic freedom. Seiden (2009) suggested that recognizing that their credibility with respect to academic quality will always be in question within the higher-education establishment, for-profit education has placed a significant interest on quality assurances. For-profit institutions have prioritized a faculty-student dialogue that positively impacts on student retention and academic success, and instituted curricula consisting of courses that students and employers demand. Likewise, Seiden posited that combining adjunct faculty—who typically work in industry, not just education—with career-minded students, energizes the classroom and provides for a better blend of theory and practice. Mays (2012) researched for-profit colleges from the point of "informed neutrality," and investigated the heavy usage of adjunct faculty in proprietary education. Although some research has found this to lead to lower quality education in the nonprofit arena, Mays argued that for-profit institutions centered on career training may benefit from using adjuncts who are often characterized as qualified professionals and practitioners as opposed to tenured academics (p. 10).

Emergent themes: Non-traditional students and proprietary institutions. The previous two sections highlighted characteristics of non-traditional students and attributes of for-profit institutions. The intent of researching these two areas individually was to allow the researcher to review their unique idiosyncratic makeup through the lens of their respective literature streams. Nonetheless, it is quite evident in the literature that non-traditional students and proprietary schools are natural complements and have a well-documented relationship. As a result of the literature review and my experience as a practitioner, a number of themes surfaced that exist

within the changing dynamics of for-profit colleges and the shifting classifications of non-traditional students. There is a natural state of existence between non-traditional students and proprietary institutions that includes comprehensive services that are exclusively designed to help stimulate the rapid growth and development of the proprietary education industry to accommodate non-traditional students. The attributes of customer service, recruitment, flexibility, and student services, marketed by proprietary colleges, all demonstrate an ability to maintain students in an environment that meets the needs of students.

Challenges in integration. The emergent themes that concluded the previous section shed light on the continuum of benefits and challenges non-traditional students face in higher education, but specifically in the proprietary college setting. The following subsections review these challenges and consider theoretical ideas from the psychology, social work, and education disciplines that can aid researchers in analyzing these challenges. The core criticism leveled at for-profit institutions is that they appear to be operated as businesses that emphasize corporate profits at the expense of learning and academic standards.

Admissions process and target market. Recruiting within the for-profit sector is scrutinized in the literature (Abelman et al., 2007). McGuire (2012) provided a succinct synopsis of these findings in the literature including "aggressive sales operations, with teams of recruiters and call centers hunting any and all prospective students," as well as "recruiting strategies [that] target the 'disadvantaged student' and inflate the high hopes of many students who may be unlikely to achieve the promised successes" (p. 134). He went on to say, "[m]ilitary students are also targeted as a result of veterans' benefits" (p. 134). Additional authors suggested that for-profit institutions have reduced the faculty to a labor force, students to clients

or customers, knowledge to a product, and education to an industry (Abelman et al., 2007; Mantel, 2011; McGuire, 2012).

Seiden (2009) argued that the aggressive marketing practices and a lack of admissions criteria held by for-profit schools enables acceptance of any and all potential students, regardless of their ability to handle college-level work (p. 1). This makes the target market of non-traditional students quite viable. Additionally, even with the aforementioned flexibility—an attribute of for-profit institutions—a considerable number still drop out, creating excessive student debt, higher default rates on student loans, and financial drains on institutions.

In an anecdotal account Tierney (2011) continued these sentiments, detailing how admissions differ from the traditional process. His explanation much resembled the sales pitch of a car salesperson. Potential consumers are found, actively convinced of the worthiness of education by, most likely, presenting solutions to the problems of the non-traditional student. Financing makes these solutions more attainable, and students are convinced to enroll, some starting school on the very same day as acceptance. Likewise, as Persell and Wenglinsky (2004), posited:

> for-profits appeal to people who have never considered a college education or even set foot on a campus. They recruit through advertisements on day-time television, in subways, or on welfare lines. This appeal to educational consumers by emphasizing that their courses are short and can offer a boost in the job market. (p. 2)

Transferring to traditional education. Doughtery (1994), as cited by Baker and Velez (1996), addressed a major challenge in transferring credits from proprietary colleges to other colleges and universities because of weak forms of articulation agreements between schools (p. 91). Studies indicated that students who began in for-profit institutions had less chance of attaining college degrees. Mantel (2011) concurred, stating that the 18% transfer rate from for-profit schools is particularly low because traditional schools will not accept for-profit credits.

Limited financial literacy of some non-traditional students. Tierney (2011) posed a key question regarding financial literacy and proprietary education: "Initially, what are students told when they apply for a federally backed loan, and whose obligation is it to educate the consumer?" (p. 4). This inquiry aimed to begin dialogue surrounding the lack of financial literacy of students enrolling in for-profit institutions, especially regarding the amount in loans secured to finance enrollment. For-profit colleges generally charge a much higher tuition than traditional or public institutions (Cellini, 2012). This also leads to discussions regarding students' return on investment as student debt levels and default rates at some for-profit colleges are skyrocketing, coupled with low graduation rates and job placements (Mantel, 2011).

College readiness and the non-traditional student. A study by Choy (2002) noted that a student displaying even the slightest number of non-traditional characteristics is more likely to pick a two-year institution than a four-year. Likewise, the study found that 89% of the attendees at private for-profit institutions were at least minimally non-traditional (p. 9). This same study found that non-traditional students who seek associate's degrees were less likely than their traditional peers to actually complete (p. 20). One major cause for said trends is cited as the lack of college readiness as indicated by the educational experience factor of non-traditional students aforementioned (Schatzel, Callahan, Scott, & Davis, 2011).

Summary. Currently, it is estimated by the U.S. Department of Education that 50% of the total number of college students—seven million—are enrolled in the for-profit sector to complete practical education that will allow them to enter the workplace. It also must be acknowledged that these students fall under the title of non-traditional, at risk students. The complexity of their lives makes it difficult to focus entirely on their educational commitments. Although there is a diverse cross section of college and universities in the western New York

area, as well a diverse array of majors and professional paths offered at these colleges and universities, the for-profit sector remains an option. For many non-traditional college students, the for-profit college may be their only option. In fact, the New York State Department of Education estimates that there are approximately four for-profits that fall under the college classification, and the majority of students who are most attracted to the for-profit college are those who do not come directly from high school. The students who enroll are usually single parents, over 25, low-income females, and holding a full or part time job. Many of these students fall into more than one of these categories.

For-profit colleges and universities are the fastest growing sector in the United States higher education system. Many demographic studies have explained that students who attend for-profit colleges are more likely to be older, independent, or of racial/ethnic minority or lower socioeconomic status than those who attend traditional higher education institutions. Although students in for-profit colleges are often equated with community college students, recent studies indicate that students in for-profit colleges exhibit substantial differences and challenges from community college students. Identifying such characteristics early on will advance the understanding of this rapidly increasing population in higher education.

It is important to recognize that continued research is required because we have limited knowledge of students at for-profit colleges. It is widely known that for-profits are more likely to attract underrepresented students. Many maintain an open admission policy with intensive student-centered services. Unfortunately, many studies often equate community college students with for-profit students. This research practice masks the distinctive characteristic of non-traditional students who attend for-profit colleges with regard to the impact of for-profit education on student success. If students are to demonstrate measurable success, for-profit

colleges should strive to increase their accountability by ensuring that their students be employed with reasonable salaries, which will enable them to repay their investment in their college education. The psychological impact of the resilience of non-traditional students will continue to be a perplexing entity that is seldom understood by traditional education administrators. The internal endurance will be the driving force of success for many of these students. The unique linkages exist in the midst of higher costs in tuition drawn to insurmountable financial debt that underserved students accrue who dare to dream of a better life by accomplishing their academic goals of graduation and employment with reasonable earnings to repay their investment for college education.

Part III: Student success models. A sharpened focus on student persistence and student completion has colleges and universities considering more operative strategies to support student success. But even for institutions with a clear concentration on persistence, putting efficient programs in place is challenging. That said, departments embedded in colleges and universities can have a real sway on student success by designing and implementing comprehensive institutional strategies that go beyond the guesses and feelings many have about what exactly drives it. Establishing a shared vision of student success and communicating that vision across a campus means an institution can more effectively align resources to support defined goals.

Introduction to student success models. The summative literary analyses of non-traditional students, proprietary institutions, and the challenges that stem from their integration culminates in a list of issues that hinder non-traditional students' success and threatens proprietary schools' existence. This final literary review examines the educational literature and empirical work for possible approaches to address these issues. As a practitioner in a proprietary institution and bearing witness to such findings as proposed above, I recognize the

need for models as a means of intervention, for they may act as a means of support and/or catalyst to change self-perceptions of non-traditional students, not only academically, but, perhaps, holistically.

The vision of involvement or academic and social integration is one of the primary factors for student success. The more students are academically and socially involved the more likely they are to persist and graduate. This is especially true during the first year of study. Tierney (1992) supported the theory that during that first year of college, the foundation upon subsequent affiliations and engagement are built and that students are more likely to succeed when they find themselves in settings that are committed to their success. Such settings are thought to hold students to high expectations, provide needed academic and social support, and offer frequent feedback, prompting student engagement. For first year students this is essential, especially engagement with other students and faculty. The vision of integration has established a framework for many student models. The following subsections review three models often used to address such change in either non-traditional students or in proprietary colleges. These models concentrate on the linkage between institutions to enhance the education of academically underprepared low-income students who require additional support in the areas of college readiness and remedial intervention.

Tierney academic success models in postsecondary education. Tierney (1991) developed a success model regarding recruitment and retention of Native American students. He explained that this group was not distinctive to the current population of young folks. However, he viewed this as a generational issue that warranted the attention of everyone; thus, it cannot evaporate or be resolved overnight. In his model, he described the 5 R's Model of Generational Resilience including *relationships, relevance, reciprocity, reproduction*, and *reframing*. He

created an interactive dialogue when addressing the 5 R's Model of Generational Resilience and defining each model. *Generational resilience* is identified as self, family, community, and past and future generations. Tierney began his change model with the ability to identify internal and external relationships. He described relevance, regarding positive change, with an ability to move forward, applying new academic programming to meet the needs of Native students. Tierney referred to pessimist vs. optimist as reciprocity (B. Bernard, 2004); giving back was one of the strong persistence factors. Reproduction refers to the concepts of social capital and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977). In reframing, Tierney created a model to move forward, regardless of one's present circumstances to recognize existing strengths. This model provided strategies for tribal communities as an outreach initiative to work together to promote Native student success.

In their article entitled "Tracking School Success: Preparing Low Income Urban Youth For College," Tierney and Jun (1999) described the challenges for college preparation programs and how education reformers have attempted to move away from the cookie cutter approach associated with organizational issues: all schools and all school children fall under the same umbrella. In this article the authors present a structural overview of the underlying tenet of broad philosophical principle about the nature of schooling, pedagogy, and organizational structure (Tierney & Jun, 1999). The same point might be made with regard to college preparation programs. Different students have different needs; therefore, different programs will need to be created for different clienteles. Thus, it is imperative that college preparation programs are created and designed to maintain programs not only responsive to the needs of a particular group; that said, linking program educators based on their strengths and

learner-specific arrangements with goals and objectives becomes imperative. There were two constructs taken into account when measuring the effectiveness of college preparation programs:

- Has the program demonstrated student success in previous programs?
- Has the program increased the likelihood of potential graduates?

The following academic programs are commonly developed with traditional testing samples as a significant gauge or indicator for science, math, and English preparation. Further, counseling and academic planning is another approach commonly implemented for the college preparation program, best described as one that focused intensively on counseling and academic skills. Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) is one example of a program that has demonstrated successful outcomes; another program that has shown success is the Upward Bound Program, where students are selected by teachers and counselors to undergo workshops that target personal development, career exploration, and college preparation by learning academic survival skills, attending performances and seminars, and visiting college campuses to get a feel for the environment of higher education. Other successful models include the TRIO program, initiated by the U. S. Department of Education. This is one of the largest federally funded programs in the country. These programs provide pathways for low income and potential first-generation college students between the ages of 13 and 19 years old who have completed at least the 8th grade. The majority of these students end up attending public universities. Providing an overview of traditional, federally funded programs introduces a theatrical concept of college preparation programs relative to cultural integrity and presents a unique alternative to the pre-college experience.

The framework of his model embraced an educational theme of cultural integrity. Education in culture is simply a process of teaching facts and figures to a faceless population; however, it is an interactive process of individual identity development and the creation of community. The primary concept is centered on cultural integrity. Tierney (2000) defined cultural integrity as those programs and teaching strategies that call upon students' racial and ethnic backgrounds in a positive manner in the development of its pedagogies. He goes on to suggest that "cultural integrity removes the problem from the child, and looks on the child's background, neither as a neutral nor a negative factor for learning" (Tierney & Jun, 2001, p. 207). Instead, the adolescent's cultural background identifies as a critical ingredient for achieving success.

Tierney (1997) established an academic model entitled *The Neighborhood Academic Initiative* (NAI), which included approximately 40 students in the seventh grade and tracked them until they graduated from high school. These students attended classes every day for two hours prior to the start of school at the University of Southern California. The instructors were hired by (NAI) and were local residents of their community. In addition, students took extra courses in the summer. Parents or guardians attended approximately six Saturday morning sessions every semester that pertained to a variety of familial issues and responsibilities relating to college. Students were disciplined throughout their program; however, it is important to note that such discipline existed within a positive framework. The program set standards for obtaining high, but attainable goals. Saturday enrichment classes and other events scattered throughout the year were geared toward providing skills most commonly associated with the idea of cultural capital. Students took trips to museums, attended plays, acquired computer skills, and learned how to deal with faculty and adults in ways that might be different from the environment

in which they live. The author has outlined the rudiments of a college preparation program that works from a framework different from most projects. However, he cautioned about the success of this program.

> NAI is successful at tracking the scholars who participate. Over 60% of those who started the program in the seventh grade graduated from high school; of those who graduated, over 60% went to a four-year research university, and 96 percent went on to some form of postsecondary institutions. (Tierney & Jun, 2001, p. 1)

What the Neighborhood Academic Initiative demonstrates is that the urban minority youth are fully capable of academic excellence and such achievement is not based on individual genius, but on the structures of schooling. Finally, Tierney (1997) suggested that the challenge of success is three fold.

- The individual scholar must accept responsibility for his or her learning and strive to achieve.
- The scholar's parents or guardians must demonstrate a willingness to help and a willingness to learn how to help
- Teachers and counselors must create the conditions for learning by emphasizing excellence, fostering high goals, and affirming the background of every youth. (p. 27)

Kenmore & Kokin College student success model. Kenmore & Kokin College implemented a success model as a part of the framework for success. Adapted from Gardner (2004), this model was introduced to college administrators, faculty, and, subsequently, staff to provide an institutional framework for meeting the college's vision and standards, as articulated in the following strategic plan. The Student Success Model set out a framework for institutional response to the needs of the student body for information, guidance, and support in managing the transition to college life, consistent with the college's personalized learning mission for a lifetime of success. In developing this interdepartmental system-wide framework, academic committees since 2002 have collaborated in order to define and execute a strategic planning process for the delivery of student services that addressed important institutional concerns:

- support for the transition from Admissions departments' enrollment to the academic experience,
- consistency in service delivery for day and evening students,
- an assessment model with measurable outcomes,
- an institutional planning strategy for the collection of student satisfaction data, functional structure, and resource allocation,
- increased ability to maintain levels of services for an increased student population, and
- a strategy to support on-line education with appropriate student services.

Many of the applications implemented by Kenmore and Kokin College were supported by Tinto's (1987) research of student retention. The student Learning Outcomes Model is also a part of the College's framework for assessment of the student outcomes vision standard. Student outcomes assessed at the institutional level include basic skills, program skills, working skills, and lifelong learning skills. Lifelong learning is the idea that in the modern world people must continue to learn all of their lives and that schools should teach people how to learn, not just what to learn. Within the college this lifelong learning vision has been defined in the following ways:

1. Four individual competencies that are defined and assessed as part of the Career Core Concept for all students
    a. Information literacy
    b. Relational learning
    c. Metacognition
    d. Community and career

2. Continual learning opportunities and programs for all of the Colleges; ASS and BBA graduates, transfer students, and members of the community
    a. Degree plus certifications
    b. Bachelor's programs
    c. Professional Skills Training

Kenmore & Kokin College's Student Success Model provides a framework for student development programs that motivate and nurture goal commitments to improve system wide persistence and graduation rates. Strategic application of individual talent and strength, guided by teachers, advisors, and associates who care about students and their lives, will help students navigate college systems, demystify particular processes in their academic lives, and aid them in becoming acclimated to the campus culture. Once accomplished, continual support throughout the academic experience is provided in order to understand and manage the changes that college life represents to the students' most important relationships, particularly with family, friends, and co-workers. Throughout the student experience students have the opportunity to investigate and reflect on prior learning, their growing intellectual competence, and realization of life goals within the communities of college, career, and life.

In conclusion, this current model of engagement is bolstered and brought to action by all associates within the Kenmore & Kokin College faculty and staff, creating a campus culture that plays an important role in shaping positive student retention behaviors in the college. The integration of such an approach collectively moves the organization to the realization of a vision and standard for relationship management, setting expectations high while still supporting student outcomes, and overall, aligning techniques of advising, teaching, and supporting students with the theoretical principles of lifelong learning. Moreover, this model reflects the following

seven stages of a coordinated student success model that puts the student first. The student is idealized as someone who studies at school or college but applies the habits of mind to acquire skills, knowledge, and understanding. As the process of inquiry is established, the student meets with the following departments in order to become processed as a member of Kenmore & Kokin College: Admissions Representatives, Financial Aid Department, Academic Advisement, Instruction, Career Services, Graduation, and Lifelong Learning.

Geoffrey Canada: College Prep Harlem Children's Zone. Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) has achieved unprecedented success, helping thousands of children and families and disrupting the cycle of generational poverty in central Harlem through innovative and effective programs. Geoffrey Canada, a pioneering leader in educational reform, worked with HCZ for more than 30 years and is renowned for his dedication to helping children and families in Harlem. From 1990 to 2014 Mr. Canada served as the President and Chief Executive Officer for HCZ, which *The New York Times* called "one of the most ambitious social-policy experiments of our time" (Tough, 2004, p. 3).

Harlem Children's Zone College Preparatory Program provides comprehensive academic enrichment year-round to students across all of their high-school sites. Services include one-on-one tutoring, standardized test prep, and assistance with college essays and financial aid applications. Students also take trips to visit college campuses and participate in a host of extracurricular activities. At the heart of the HCZ's College Prep programming is a unique Academic Case Management (ACM approach). Through ACM all middle-school, high-school, and college students are assigned a Student Advocate. Guidance counselors in New York City public schools have an averaged caseload of 400 students. Student Advocates advise an average

of 25 students, working closely with each one to create individualized action plans with concrete, targeted strategies to help advance academic and personal development.

Everything is focused on helping student's to achieve college readiness and supporting team effort. According to Harlem Children's Zone website, "Student Advocates collaborate with parents, teachers, tutors, social workers, and other stakeholders. It is considered a multi-pronged approach" (http://hcz.org/our-programs/college-preparatory-program/). Instead of a linear method, HCZ knows that "College readiness calls for a robust knowledge base in core subject areas in addition to strong study habits and academic behaviors, as well as non-cognitive skills, such as curiosity, grit, persistence, and resourcefulness" (http://hcz.org/our-programs/college-preparatory-program/). Further in HCZ's statement of philosophy, it states that "Across sites and grades, students are helped to develop both the character traits and the soft skills they need to face the many challenges that college brings and achieve their long-term academic, professional and personal goals," and ultimately, "the college prep programs consist of far more than campus visits and case management" (http://hcz.org/our-programs/college-preparatory-program/). It is by these means that HCZ's enthusiastic and devoted staff dependably aims to cultivate a college-going culture, in which each and every child is empowered to aim high and is equipped with the resilience and tools to follow through.

"Relationships Matter: Linking Teacher Support to Student Engagement and Achievement" is an article detailing suggestions and recommendations to assist teachers in providing an atmosphere of caring for their students (Klem & Connell, 2004). These authors described how students need to feel their teachers are involved with them and care about them. Students also need to feel they can make important decisions for themselves and the work they are assigned has relevance to their present or future lives. They also require a clear sense of

structure within which to make those decisions. Young people need to know what adults expect regarding conduct, that consistent and predictable consequences result from not meeting those expectations, and that the expectations are fair. Studies show students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, as well as more satisfaction with school.

Klem and Connell (2004) also explored the causes and consequences of engagement. They defined and measured two forms of engagement: ongoing engagement and reaction to challenge. On-going engagement aligns closely with other definitions of engagement and refers to student behavior, emotions, and thought processes during the school day. Behavioral engagement includes timed student work, intensity of concentration and effort, tendency to stay on task, and propensity to initiate action when given the opportunity. Emotional components of engagement include heightened levels of positive emotion during the completion of an activity, demonstrated by enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. Cognitive components of engagement include students' understanding of why they are doing what they're doing and its importance.

Federally funded programs. Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR-UP Program), an educational partnerships/collaborations between public schools, institutions of higher education, private industry, and or/select community-based organizations. More specifically, it examines the government's most recent attempt to encourage these institutions to work together to improve services for at-risk students through federally funded programs. This partnership /collaboration involves the local public school system, area colleges and universities, private industry, and/or select community-based groups. The GEAR-UP program supports local partnerships and New York State's efforts to develop or expand

comprehensive programs that provide the opportunities, support, and information that at-risk middle and high school students need in order to have high expectations, stay in school, study hard, and attend college.

Early intervention programs to assist students in K-12 were first established during this time by philanthropic and private entitlements (Martin, 2000). These efforts began with interest in providing early college intervention programs initially targeted at minority, low-income high school juniors and seniors. Many programs were established during this time such as *A Better Chance Collaboration*/*Partnership*, established in 1963 by independent schools to focus on improving the enrollment of minority high school students in academically challenging public and private schools across the United States (Fenske, Gerianos, Keller, & Moore, 1997). The federal government became involved in these actions by establishing the *Federal Trio Programs*, through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, funded under Title IV. The Trio Programs have been dedicated to assisting low-income, first-generation students in overcoming class and social barriers, leading to successful entrance into and graduation from college (Wolanin, 1997).

For over three decades, these programs have provided services from the pre-college level to post-graduate studies including talent searches, academic support, admissions counseling, financial aid, and scholarship assistance for students in grades six through twelve. Upward Bound students receive intensive college preparation through advising, counseling, instruction, and tutoring on college campuses in after-school and summer programs. These students also participate in college admissions activities and life skills workshops. Student Support Services provides tutoring, advising, developmental instruction, and other student services to students who are currently attending college, until they earn their baccalaureate degrees (http://www.ericdigests.org/2000-3/early.htm). Educational Opportunity Centers help adults,

including displaced or unemployed workers, select and apply for postsecondary education and financial aid. The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program encourages low-income students and minority undergraduates to pursue a career in college teaching by providing faculty mentors and research opportunities (Fenske et al., 1997). Early intervention programs played a very important and significant role in providing services to minority students. As the participation rates of African-American and Latino students continued to increase, these programs were the key elements to providing a solid framework to increase the retention of at-risk, low-income minority students and aid in their success.

The preceding sections identified non-traditional students, proprietary colleges, challenges of non-traditional students in proprietary colleges, programs that would prove supportive, and successful for students entering the academic arena with limited college readiness skills. Questions continue to surface regarding who takes responsibility for the lack of student success. Research is needed that connects the research on developmental education, which we refer to as remedial education, of these low-income students who, through very little fault of their own, are not prepared for successful outcomes. There continues to be a social disconnect between state and local governments, school boards, and the community.

The federal government should consider funded programs to enhance the education of academically underprepared low-income students and their persistence to accomplish program completion. Financial support must provide leadership of different forms of developmental education in different domains of academic need. It has been validated that students' test scores reflect that they are unable to read and write at acceptable levels; therefore, funded pre-college readiness should be implemented. Future funded pursuits could possibly assist in creating meaningful programs under federal guidelines**.** Action research is needed to increase polices that

will become visible and accountable to a range of political constituencies. Parents, students, educators, and politicians should provide educational research that would be beneficial to all stakeholders.

Research is also needed with regard to the graduation rates in for-profit education. It is not enough to acknowledge that these for-profit institutions have a higher proportion of underserved racial and ethnic minorities. As a result of research, we are aware of these findings. Future research must be explored to learn the barriers that exist and the intervention required to support non-traditional students to achieve the ultimate goal of completion. For-profit institutions are aware of what confronts this at-risk student population. Research to help address innovative initiatives of social support is limited from a social perspective.

Conclusion

This literature review has represented a rational overview of the stench of poverty and the side effects that impede the growth and development of our young people. The silent epidemic of high school drop-outs and non-traditional students are supported by literature that documents our current social dilemma. Theorists such as Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam discussed how a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition create social and cultural capital to the benefit of some but not all. Educational theorists such as Dewey, have advocated for a practical and functional approach to learning where students are able to describe the reality of their lived experiences. Glasser suggested a new and fresh approach for creating positive choices and moving forward, where students focus less on a need to justify their past experiences and poor choices. Renden, Friere, and Fisher created a holistic approach for students to define themselves through their social lives and

personal narratives. As a result learning becomes an extension of the relation among language, meaning- making, and self-development.

Moreover, what emerges is a strong mental health connection, unfolding for students who have a desire to build a positive mental health attitude toward success. As students continue to grow and develop, Bahktin reminded us of the importance of language, dialogue, communication, and conversation. Allowing students to open up and share their feelings and attitudes produces a framework for self-validation and self-respect. As students share their private feelings of skepticism in the confidential spaces created by peer mentors or advisors or in the more public space of the classroom they carve out the necessary pathways for creative problem solving. It is the very essence of these real life experiences that color and give life to the process of learning. Without knowing, students may commonly find themselves emulating and identifying with the movements of Bloom's taxonomy. They will strive not just to know, but comprehend; not just to comprehend, but apply; not just apply, but analyze; not just analyze, but synthesize; and not just synthesize, but evaluate the world around them.

The combination of the select theories in this literature review, when pieced together, produce the scaffolding for understanding the human life experiences of non-traditional students attempting to maintain a culture of completion. In large part, these non-traditional students find themselves walking the halls of for-profit colleges. Notably, for-profit colleges and universities are the fastest growing sector in the United States' higher education system. Many demographic studies have explained that students who attend for-profit colleges are more likely to be older, independent, of racial or ethnic minority, or have a lower socioeconomic status than those who attend traditional higher education institutions. Although students in for-profit colleges are often equated with community college students, recent studies indicate that students in for-profit

colleges face substantial differences and challenges than community college students. Identifying characteristics early on will advance the understanding of this rapidly increasing population in higher education.

It is important to recognize that continued research is required because we have limited knowledge of students at for-profit colleges. It is widely known that for-profits are more likely to attract underrepresented students. Many maintain an open admission policy with intensive student-centered services. Unfortunately, many studies equate community college students with for-profit students. This research practice masks the distinctive characteristic of non-traditional students who attend for-profit colleges with regard to the impact of for-profit education on student success. If students are to demonstrate measurable success, for-profit colleges should strive to increase their accountability by ensuring that their students be employed with reasonable salaries, enabling them to repay their investment in their college education. The psychological impact of the resilience of non-traditional students will continue to be a perplexing entity that is seldom understood by traditional education administrators. This internal endurance will be the driving force of success for many of these students. Unique linkages exist, in the midst of higher costs in tuition, resulting in insurmountable financial debt that underserved students accrue who dare to dream of a better life by accomplishing their academic goals of graduation and employment (with reasonable earnings to repay their investment for college education).

Research Methodology

Given the complexity of the problems in higher education related to non-traditional students and their singular experiences in the classroom and community, this research reflects a multi-disciplinary, multi-dimensional approach to contemporary research in an attempt to answer the following question: What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their post-secondary education at proprietary colleges? It is my expectation to expand knowledge and create improved opportunities for non-traditional students, practitioners, educators, and policy makers as added particulars are disclosed that will assist in insightful pedagogy and direction in the successful guidance of favorable student outcomes relative to retention and graduation.

To better understand and gain such insight into the challenges and successes of non-traditional students, specifically those ages 21 and older, I serve as a listener and advocate, and they are identified as participants and tellers so that I may learn from the voices of these non-traditional students as they make meaning of their experiences in the classroom, as they work to create a balance between setting educational goals and enhancing the lifestyles of themselves and their families. The ultimate goal of the research is to (a) acquire a deeper understanding not only of the challenges and successes but also of the influences on non-traditional students as they encounter their journey into the world of academia and (b) to explore the various factors that may have contributed to support positive leadership along with responsible citizenship to facilitate persistence and continuity while pursuing the accomplishment of higher education.

I used narrative thematic analysis, a qualitative approach, to discover the meaning that non-traditional students ascribe to their life experience as students. Qualitative research is

based on a world view which is holistic. Atkinson, Coffrey, and Selamont (2001) suggested early on that qualitative research is a method that focuses on the way people interpret and make sense of their experiences and the world in which they live (Atkinson et al., 2001). Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as "[A]n inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (p. 15). Understanding the lived experiences of people requires attention to individuals' personal composition, their perceptions about life, individual growth, and character development (i.e., behavior, attitude, values, and beliefs). Uncovering the circumstances that may impact and alter lives, particularly how students view their ability to thrive within their own community as well as within other more heterogeneous groups, will result in affording better qualitative research methods, in particular, narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry offers a distinct voice and meaning to these non-traditional student participants in this study.

Research Questions

This study illustrates specific social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on the campus of Kenmore & Kokin College in New York and underlines experiences promoted that have impeded or enhanced students' persistence to graduation. Hence, the following foreshadowed research questions were posed:

1. Is student self-identity linked to academic achievement and successful outcomes?
2. What role does faculty support and/or classroom environment play in student persistence in seeking admission into college—in particular, Kenmore & Kokin College?

3. What methods successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their postsecondary education at proprietary colleges?

This chapter begins with a general description of the non-traditional student as related in the extant literature. The participants in this study were members of this defined group. Next I discuss the methodological characteristics of narrative inquiry as it is relevant to the research design of this study. I describe the method of the study including the site of the study, the participants, the data collection, and analysis. Finally, I included my positionality in relation to this research project as an important contribution to the co-construction of meaning in the ultimate findings from this research.

Characteristics of Purposeful Sample: Non-Traditional Students

Non-traditional students are the new faces of American culture in postsecondary education and are increasingly growing in number (Laing & Robinson, 2003). This subset of students has unique obligations, responsibilities, and situations from the typical college population. With the increase of non-traditional students, research can provide understanding and evaluation of the motivations and life skills of adult learners, resulting in information that can, in turn, aid student retention (Jacobson & Harris, 2008). Current research on non-traditional students examines their motivation for attending college or institutions of higher education, which results in a variety of reasons (Jacobson & Harris, 2008). A primary reason for non-traditional students attending college is to focus on a job or career, whether it is to obtain or to continue job skills and knowledge (Merriam, Cafarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Some of the additional reasons are to increase knowledge with technology, literacy, civic education, leisure, and community-based social-action initiatives (Merriam et al., 2007).

In order to establish a meaningful dialogue, one must have a functional definition of traditional and non-traditional students. The traditional undergraduate student is characterized as one who earns a high school diploma, enrolls full time immediately after finishing high school, depends on parents for financial support, and either does not work during the school year or works part time (Choy, 2002). While traditional undergraduate students are generally able to direct most of their energy toward their studies, non-traditional students (older students, parents, especially single parents, and students who work full time) have family and work responsibilities competing with school for their time, energy, and financial resources (Choy, 2002). That said, however, this foundational designation provides the roots from which the literature has progressed. In this study four specific factors played a major role in locating and understanding non-traditional student experience.

Biographical factors. From the definition in the previous section, the characteristics of the purposeful sample for this study are identified as biographical, work status, financial independence, familial structure and responsibility, as well as experiences in education systems. Horn (1996) indirectly addressed the age factor when considering non-traditional students' delayed enrollment although the study purposely diverts attention away from such biographic factors (p. 3). Much of the research, however, distinguishes the time elapsed between secondary and postsecondary enrollment to extend further than one year. Metzner and Bean (1987) stated that students begin the postsecondary admissions process around 23 years of age and older; alternatively, students who begin the postsecondary admissions process after maintaining a sustained break in their educational progression are also considered non-traditional. J. Taylor and House (2010) administered a questionnaire in which 59.5% of the respondents were classified as mature students, or 21 years of age or older. Newbold, Mehta, and Forbus (2010)

described non-traditional students as being over 24 years of age. Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) looked at non-traditional students as 28 years of age or older. Jinkens (2009) looked at the variables of age and learning style to be major determinants of whether students are traditional or non-traditional. Jinkens purposely avoided gender, racial, and socioeconomic characteristics in his definition as he felt that certain learning styles were linked with the student type.

Prior to World War II, non-traditional students sought vocations, trades, and apprenticeships and were often male (Newbold et al., 2010). After WWII there was a rise in female students entering education as they left the factories for home but desired more autonomy outside of the home. Likewise, as the social climate changed over the decades, traditional and non-traditional students alike saw increases in enrollment by women although their motivations for enrollment differed. Current research suggests that women respondents in various studies that analyze non-traditional students have increased, citing many of them to be single parents (Choy, 2002; Newbold et al., 2010; J. Taylor & House, 2010).

Ogren (2003) made historical reference to minorities as being non-traditional students when describing non-traditional forms of higher education institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the exclusion of race in studies by Horn (1996) and Choy (2002) was intended as these researchers aimed to look at choices and behaviors that increased risk in a traditional setting.

Work status and financial independence. Motivations for older individuals to seek out higher education increased as employment moved from the production sector to more service sector career opportunities (Newbold et al., 2010). Seay (2006) categorized these non-traditional students into profiles:

> One is a middle-class adult student whose enrollment in college classes is motivated by the desire to enhance work opportunities. The other is (described as) a low-income adult student whose enrollment in college classes is motivated by a desire to enhance living conditions. (p. 23)

Ross-Gordon (2011) identified the multiple roles and responsibilities of adult learners, with many of them identifying themselves as workers first, then students. Indeed, many students identified themselves as employees first and students second (Newbold et al., 2010).

Familial structure and responsibility. A major impetus of Horn's (1996) study was the changing landscape of undergraduate students exhibiting characteristics that were considered non-traditional at the time. Students having dependents (whether spouse or non-spouse) were increasing. Newbold et al. (2010) chose not to include "the presence of children or dependents in its operationalizing of its non-traditional variable," although the authors acknowledged that "researchers often include this factor in construct design" (p. 4). A study by Schatzel et al. (2011) defined, "the 'Family Ties' segmentation of 'stay-outs,' or students who have attended college previously, but have ceased enrollment due to family responsibilities" (p. 55). Segmentation, "Married & Comfortable" comprised 20% of the respondents and earned the highest salaries of study participants; these individuals left school because they felt college would not benefit their career advancement.

Experience in education. A continuing theme in the existing literature is that non-traditional students have delayed their entrance into postsecondary education. Some researchers attributed this delay to not completing high school, or getting an equivalency (Choy, 2002; Horn, 1996). However, some non-traditionals are professionals who are seeking to continue education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). As mentioned above, Seay's (2006) depiction of two differing non-traditional students also lends insight to the idea of these polarizing

descriptions. There is still a third experience: students who drop out or who begin postsecondary education but discontinue enrollment for a number of reasons (Schatzel et al., 2011).

The Relevance of Qualitative Methodology to This Study

Adult learners think within the contextual frames of social, cultural, political, and economic forces. Attaching critical reflection and an awareness of why we connect meaning to reality is a characteristic of adult learning. We are on the brink of realizing a more holistic perspective of adults within the context of their culture and society with critical theory and feminist theory widening the lens through which we define adult education (Merriam, 1993; Tweedell, 2000). Significant information from these perspectives revealed who has access to particular learning opportunities (Merriam, 1993; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999), who succeeds in a particular learning environment, and for whom a particular curriculum is designed.

Critical race theory is a broad approach to challenging and destabilizing this established knowledge, encouraging identification and confrontation of social constructs that create inequality and injustice (Leonardo, 2004). P. Taylor (1993) posited that Paulo Freire laid the foundation for critical theory with his insistence on situating educational activity in the lived experience of participants. A major thrust of critical theory has been to take adult learning to a macro perspective with the goal of social change and to "uncover oppressive forces that hinder individuals from developing their full potential" (Merriam, 1993, p. 11).

This approach to learning troubles the institution of higher education and the large society by analyzing social disparities to capture and transcend oppression and, thus, marginalization. The intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality and their role in shaping how adults think about learning and knowing are being acknowledged (Caffarella, 1992; Luttrell, 1989). Maintaining that people interpret the world in terms of its similarities and differences,

Bruner (1990) suggested that with narrative thinking, the mind engages in sequential, action-oriented, detail-driven thought and that these thoughts take the form of stories and "gripping drama." Clandinin and Connelly (2000) defined narrative inquiry as “a method that uses the following field texts as data sources: stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, photos (and other artifacts), and life experience” (p. 22). They posited that every person has a reservoir of stories—ancestor stories, origin stories, stories from childhood—that, whether any particular individual knows it or not, shape the defining narrative of his or her life.

Consequently, another important aspect of narrative inquiry is its usefulness in challenging patriarchal practices, by giving voice or what Collins (1998) referred to as "breaking silence,” usually in the context of an individual speaking out against some kind of institutional knowledge with a view to advancing the cause of a collective group. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1971) related this concept to education and culture in a way that is defined by several important characteristics. One of these characteristics is the theory of a culture of silence, which keeps the oppressed from knowing how to deal with reality in terms of knowledge, as this knowledge is perpetuated and sanctioned by their oppressors. Freire (1971) advocated dialogue exchange as a means of transgressing this culture of silence because “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (p. 44). Therefore, it follows that in addition to exploring the challenges that non-traditional students are faced with, even those noted by Freire, in his publication, recognizably, the unwavering persistence and ability to communicate his/her own needs (as a student) on the pathway to graduation invoked using narrative inquiry to approach this study, give voice to students who may have been silenced by the status quo.

Narrative Inquiry Methodology

Narrative inquiry is a means of "collecting, analyzing, and re-presenting people's stories as told by them" (Etherington, 2004, p. 75): stories that often challenge traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge, and personhood. Such gathering of stories can be harvested in a variety of creative ways: unstructured interviews, conversations, written stories, journals, diaries, video diaries, metaphors, poems, symbols, photographs, life lines, identity boxes, and drawings (Etherington, 2003). It is an umbrella term that captures personal and human dimensions of experience over time and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach is reinforced by feminist postmodern values concerned with collaboration and reflexivity.

Etherington (2004) has described narrative inquiry as a bridge between research and practice. Thus, it is important that researchers state their philosophical position and show how it influences their research practices. Narrative inquiry brings into play philosophical influences that include memorable, interesting knowledge that brings together layers of understanding about a person or group, their culture and how they have effected change. As participants tell and demonstrate to us what has happened to them on their (personal/life) journey, we listen to and hear their struggle to make sense of the past and create meaning. It is important to note that the researcher's discovery of complex patterns, descriptions of identity construction and reconstruction, and evidence of social discourses that impact a person's knowledge are viewed from specific cultural standpoints, which may add to the depth of information gathered for research and affect its analysis.

In order to establish a philosophical view of myself as researcher, it was important to acknowledge the relevance of my epistemological views. My self-examination suggested that I

had tendencies that identified with the ideals and principles of narrative philosophy: constructivism, collaboration, and reflexivity.

Constructivism is "a product of one's own creation; each individual sees and interprets the world from their experiences through personal belief systems. Therefore, Narrative Inquiry allows us to hear how individuals construct meaning from within these systems of belief, attitudes, values, and ideas that create formations of self- identity" (Etherington, 2009, https://www.keele.ac.uk/media/keeleuniversity/facnatsci/schpsych/documents/counselling/conference/5thannual/NarrativeApproachestoCaseStudies.pdf). Thus, as Clandinin and Connelly posited, narrative research inquiry reflects not only the internal and external world of the storyteller but also the researcher's co-construction and interpretation of storyteller's shared experiences.

Collaborative research is another factor whereby each party educates the other with the intention of creating knowledge for the purpose of improving conditions that promote voices that are less often heard. This approach recurrently requires the use of reflexivity where relationships between researcher and researched continue to shape meaning.

> Reflexivity is a dynamic process of interaction within and between us and participants, and the data that informs decisions, actions, and interpretations at all stages. We are therefore operational on several different levels at the same time. (Etherington, 2009, p. 226)

Collaborative research clearly defines the relationship established between non-traditional students participating in this study and their advisor. Narrative research design can uncover the nature and quality of relationships participants had with their learning community and can necessarily include the reflexive presence of my role as researcher and participant in this same community of learning.

Method of the Study

A narrative inquiry research method that will emphasize both challenges and successes that non-traditional students have experienced as a part of their educational passage of lifelong learning was employed for this study. It was my intention as a researcher to bring collaborative and reflexive meaning to the stories shared with me during the process of this research study. Participants, 21 and older, reflected upon their involvement, recalling positive and negative experiences, charting into unfamiliar territories as students attempt to enter college, complete their GED's, or proceed with the continuation of graduating to obtain an associate's degree. My objective was to maintain a flexible interviewing approach where participants freely shared their experiences in a setting that was well-known to them and ensured privacy in hope of putting them at ease and ensuring the depth and detail of the stories. By doing so, I posed open-ended questions while critically listening to the participants.

Organizational storage of the data served as a major component in managing research materials. Further, as a conscientious researcher, in my descriptions, I observed and paid special attention to the participant's mood, personality, and body language, attempting to illustrate a cohesive and inclusive portrait of a particular experience. Through profile interviews, participants shared their personal reflections to include their past, present, and future ambitions as well as career goals.

Patton (2002) stated, "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perception of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, in order to gather their stories" (p. 341). Education researchers Clandinen and Connelly (2000) emphasized the dynamic and dialogical nature of narrative research in their historical definition, which suggests the following:

> Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experiences. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, and reliving and retelling the stories of the experience that makes up people's lives, both individual and social. Simply stated, narrative inquiry is stories lived and told. (Clandinen & Connelly, 2000, p. 20)

As a final point of accomplishment, my ultimate goal was to translate this study—relative to narrative methodology—by using narrative inquiry as a comprehensive instrument, acknowledging and understanding lived experiences that are relevant to non-traditional students.

Description of the Study Site

The campus of Kenmore & Kokin College represented my research site. This urban college offered a personalized learning framework for an exchange of information, guidance, and support to assist students in managing the transition into college life and college readiness programs. The National Center for Education Statistics (2009) reported that at least 73% of undergraduates have at least one "non-traditional characteristic which includes not enrolling in college immediately after high school graduation, working full-time or part-time, having dependents, being a single parent, or not possessing a high school diploma" (p. 107). The research supports the challenges of retention and attrition faced by these students (Noel, Levitz, & Saluri, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1987; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora., 1996): this situation is—at best—an uphill climb for at-risk, non-traditional students. Sadly, these challenges become even greater whenever gender and minority status are added to the equation. Duquaine-Waston (2007) identified the collegial educational environment facing minority single mothers as a "chilly climate." She also stated, "it is an evident factor in the attitudes, practices and policies marginalized students too often encounter when they interact with faculty, staff, and other students" (p. 229).

The research guiding this study placed special emphasis on how non-traditional students perceived their experiences in completing the requirements for their GED and, subsequently, completing the requirements for an associate's degree from a postsecondary for-profit institution. The research provided answers to additional questions related to student success, particularly the impact of ethnic, cultural, or social factors on the student's growth and development as a scholar and the student's social adjustment to desirable citizenship values.

Academic programs at Kenmore & Kokin College. Purposely, academic advisement is not a new experience for the Achieve student population on the urban campus of Kenmore & Kokin College. The continuity of service was ensured when the college began to assign a primary advisor during the initial student intake process, creating a synergy of movement involving the same academic advisor throughout the student's three program. This relationship is designed to support students' academic success and achievement. The following programs are included in the Achieve initiative: Pathways Adult Education GED Program, the Pre-college Academy, (college readiness program) and the Achieve College In-House Student Program—all aligned in a coordinated, multidimensional effort to aid students in the successful completion of their academic certificates and degrees, with the goal of graduation. Although it is important that students master academic skills, nonacademic skills are also vital in preparing students for successful outcomes, as students enter the College's Achieve Student Program. Academic advisement is integrated with initial counseling, guiding, and nurturing students through new and challenging experiences. Intrusive academic advising is available to support students in handling the nonacademic and personal factors that disrupt student performance and inhibit success. Since these outside influences are often times spontaneous and sporadic in nature, a nonlinear,

multidimensional approach is critical in establishing a structural framework with flexible undertones.

Students' primary intervention is to seek personal validation of self through their educational experiences by utilizing divergent thinking and creativity to construct new educational narratives. This commonly begins by the use of positive language and collaborative communication. Consequently, the program's name Achieve Student suggests positive accomplishment within a student's academic life, and positive word usage intended to provide a framework for students to continue their journey of success, by entering the college to complete New York State General Education Diploma requirements, in addition to accomplishing academic goals to obtain an associate's degree. Among first-year students, dialogue is imperative, allowing for self-reflection and self-reflexivity where students' stories shape new perspectives and possibilities. Additionally, by connecting an on-going weekly discussion regarding the nuances and challenges of balancing work-life and family with the new discoveries occurring in their academic-life (fundamentally, those occurrences that happen in their traditional developmental education courses and during tutoring sessions) to address any academic challenges becomes an essential exercise in proactively aiding students in maintaining favorable standing. Many students at the college have been out of school over a ten-year period of time and are returning, which means a large percentage of them are confronted with an educational learning gap, requiring continuous positive reinforcement to build and maintain self-confidence. As a result, the academic advising process engages the student in personal interaction between student and academic advisor; such interactions may take on numerous forms.

Non-judgmental intervention by the academic advisor is important in the initial process of linking the student to a traditional academic setting. This initial intake process results in

prescriptive academic advising. This is, basically, a clerical function acquiring the student's background information and identifying the salient support systems that are necessary to the student's success. Often, it may give the impression of maintaining a clerical role, recognizing that prescriptive academic advising requires the logging of information (primary telephone numbers, secondary numbers, and employment numbers) and, even more importantly, gathering a record of those people who play a significant role in the student's life. Additionally, the adviser may be required to further discuss an individual's support system in hypothetical situations, just in case a student's daily life scenarios begin to distract or prevent the student from carrying out academic obligations. Further, the academic advisor engages in developmental academic advising, where the relationship between the student and advisor focuses on the student's established academic goals. Developmental advising hones in on the growth of the student, instilling an awareness of the relationship between education and life, the ability to set realistic academic and career goals, and programs that foster awareness of life that extends beyond the college student years. This affords the opportunity for the advisor to assign courses that would meet the student's home and work life schedules. All of these factors are taken into consideration, and the student can utilize the advisor as a resource for dialogic communication where both parties are engaged in collaborative dialogue to create and maintain a schedule that is tailored to the student's individual success.

Moreover, the relationship connection is not only an academic competence but also a personal involvement, developing or validating life purpose, both associated with academic success. Upon the completion of the scheduling, students are encouraged to return weekly to discuss their feelings and attitudes relative to their new academic experiences as first-semester students. Structured intervention protocols are used to motivate the student to seek help at the

first sign of academic difficulty. As a result of weekly meetings, there are early warning systems that provide for immediate action-oriented response to specific academic or personal problems, which may be addressed in a timely manner, as the professionally trained advisor responds to various situations, creating a positive problem-solving and/or referral environment for the student to acquire appropriate psychosocial interventions.

This continuity of service provides the advisor and student an opportunity to engage in collaborative decision-making initiatives to support academic goals, successfully completing required coursework and retention. Advisors also have the opportunity to engage in discussions of citizenship and servant leadership to enable the students to give back to their community. Often students may suggest community service projects that could enhance community organizations and civic groups, viewing servant leadership as a part of collaborative conversations. This yields an interconnected success—recognizing both the student and the meaningful investment in the community—worthy of being celebrated. In doing so, our celebrations are centered on the student's academic achievement, cultural integrity, and servant leadership in college activities or within the community.

The Achieve Program is a structured developmental education program that identifies and addresses students' academic and nonacademic qualities, factoring in their personal uniqueness—all of which may affect student success and retention in a favorable manner. In contrast, the realization for developmental educators and higher education officials to commit to studying those same students that they have lobbied for and decide what elements of a model (academic) program are appropriate for their students would unquestionably serve as a worthwhile investment in a population that has a distinctive impact on our nation's economy. Conclusively, these practitioners must continue to broaden the thinking of developmental

education faculty to ensure that they are researching on-going initiatives that continue to improve the quality and service provided to our students in order to enhance and re-evaluate successful college programs, ultimately promoting academic excellence and civic engagement.

My role in the college. Admittedly, I have both a personal and professional commitment to the positive student outcomes in education and community leadership. Although this study of current students might be considered a limitation, as a result of my personal relationships, it may be reframed as the ability of the researcher to engage in the research process with individuals who are not, as of yet, socialized to the culture of higher education. The development of trust in a listener-advocate relationship is more often a by-product of a continuous shared process in which the manager's attitudes, decisions, and behavior impact the subordinate's expectations of the manager as a leader (Auvinen, Aaltio, & Blomqvist, 2013).

We are beginning from the ground up in completing the educational competencies of obtaining a GED and moving forward into the future of creating better employment opportunities and scholarship. I recognized that my role, as practitioner/researcher, carried a greater responsibility to represent the voices as authentically as possible and to refine my personal biases as a researcher. As a researcher, I intended to be patient and diligent in seeking clarity and discerning the true essence of the experiences of these students. My role as an advisor might have been construed as a limitation; however, in this case, it was to be reframed as an asset supporting the study as my ability to build trust and advocate for students may indeed build openness, and, in establishing a credible research relationship, I might further create a genuine collaboration—over a period of time—in working with these students. Consequently, in this case, the art of storytelling leadership comes into fold as I facilitates engagement and study participants by creating an energetic voice, but more importantly from a posture of tolerance and

identification as a multifaceted researcher, utilizing my professional skill set to include social work, academic advisement, and program coordination.

Participants, Recruitment, and Selection

Participants in this study were drawn from a group of individuals who qualify as part of the non-traditional student population in the United States. However, all participants successfully completed an educational program and were not currently students. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (2002), non-traditional students are typically members of the groups identified as African American, Latin American, Native American, and under-advantaged Caucasian American non-traditional students; in addition, each student also possesses one or more of the following characteristics:

- does not enter postsecondary enrollment in the same year that he or she completed high school,
- attends part-time for at least part of the academic years,
- works full time/or part time,
- is a single parent,
- does not have a high school diploma but does have a GED equivalency credential, and
- is an adult learner 21 years and older.

Participant Acquisition

As a result of the initial request for participants, the aim was to secure consent from 30 participants. The dinner yielded 30 consent forms. Formal letters were sent to these interested parties with a request for a formal decision to participate. Follow-up efforts resulted in 21 replies and 14 actual participants.

Participant Demographics

Participants of this study gained enrollment in the College as members of a series of intervention programs, namely: Pathways Adult Education GED Program (Pathways), the Pre-College Academy (PCA), and the Achieve College In-House Student Program (Achieve)—all aligned in a coordinated, multidimensional effort to aid students in the successful completion of their academic certificates and degrees, with the goal of graduation. Subsequently, all participants were high school drop-outs who had experienced some sort of disenfranchisement with education early in life. Further, the participants involved in the study included male and female (minority and otherwise) and students whose ages ranged from 21–57 years. The most visible of these respondents included single parents, including men, but mostly women, whose ages consistently fell between 23 and 28 years. Each of the participants had successfully completed each of the intervention programs and had graduated from the college with an associate's degree.

As aforementioned, the Kenmore & Kokin College campus is one of nine urban campuses among the proprietary college's 17 campuses in the United States. According to a 2011 census of the student body, students at this campus are overwhelmingly minority, being 50% African American and 4% Hispanic, overwhelmingly female with a population of 79% of the student body identifying as women, and overwhelmingly adult with 50% of the population above 30 years of age (Kenmore & Kokin College, 2011).

As compared to Buglione (2012), the participants exhibited numerous characteristics depicted in the Universe of Non-traditional students, thus qualifying them for participation in this study. Participants reported and identified with (a) delayed enrollment in post-secondary education, (b) over-represented racial minority, (c) lack of standard high school diploma, (d)

financially independent from parent, (e) single parent (f) commuter, and (g) first generation college student (see Table 3.1 which provides a detailed snapshot of the participants).

Table 3.1

A Profile of the Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Race	Major	Year obtained GED	Year obtained Associate's	Pursing Bachelors? (Y or N)
Sharon	57	Female	Black	Medical Assisting	2013	2014	N
Jennifer	60	Female	Black	Medical Assisting	2013	2014	Y
Marissa	35	Female	Caucasian	Network Technology	2013	2014	Y
Michael	28	Male	Black	Business Administration	2013	2014	Y
Jack	28	Male	Caucasian	Business Administration	2013	2015	N
Aloha	44	Female	Black	Business Administration	2013	2014	N
Charles	32	Male	African	Network Technology	2013	2014	N
Martine	32	Female	Black	Accounting	2013	2014	N
Tia	41	Female	Black	Criminal Justice	2011	2013	N
Alexandria	32	Female	Black	Business Administration	2012	2014	Y
Mike Delta	31	Male	Black	Network Technology	2012	2013	N
Mariah	32	Female	Black	Criminal Justice	2013	2014	N
Sky	42	Female	Black	Criminal Justice	2013	2014	N
Sophia	36	Female	Black	Criminal Justice	2012	2013	N

Data Collection Method

Alumni of Kenmore & Kokin College were invited to a Student Achievement Luncheon held to celebrate personal and academic achievements. The luncheon was scheduled to take place on Saturday, March 14, 2015. At the luncheon, faculty and staff honored those alumni who (a) had completed their GED, (b) graduated with an associate's degree, (c) graduated with a bachelor's degree, and (d) were successfully employed. As part of the luncheon activities, college alumni were invited to share brief testimonies regarding their academic experiences while attending the college. These testimonials were not part of the research project, but moreover, were a college tradition celebrating the success of students. Because it was often difficult for alumni to return to campus on a weekday, given work obligations, interviewing was made available following the luncheon; some students interviewed the following day. If participants were not available at either of these times, then arrangements were made to interview them at a time convenient to the researcher and participant.

Student Achievement Luncheon/Program Design and Narrative Videotaping: Day 1

Step 1. Invitations for the luncheon were mailed to all participants, faculty, and staff of Kenmore & Kokin College, requesting their attendance at our Student Achievement Luncheon on Saturday, March 14, 2015. The invitations had a reply deadline of Wednesday, March 11, 2015. All alumni were previously contacted by phone throughout the month of February 2015 to ensure favorable attendance, pending their availability for this date. All alumni who planned to attend were contacted by telephone, when a description of the research study was further read and explained to them. Once the explanation was completed, alumni were asked if they would like to participate. Many participants at the time of this study did not have access to email; therefore, a phone call was the preferred method of contact. If they chose to participate, they

were asked to come to a private area prior to the luncheon to complete the Informed Consent and to sign up for an interview time

Step 2. Prior to the beginning of the taping of the interview, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions about the research project. Later, videotaping between the researcher and the participant occurred in a converted classroom. The classroom was set up for one-on-one dialogue between researcher and participant with a digital recorder to document student accounts. The recording equipment was controlled externally (from outside the secured room) by remote, merely, turning equipment on and off. This, however, was executed by a professional audio/video engineer to ensure that the integrity of the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee (participant) were respected and, furthermore, that the content was captured in its most natural state.

Step 3. Upon completion of each interview, the recording equipment was reset by the audio/video engineer to resume the process for the next one-on-one taping.

Program Design and Narrative Videotaping (Continued): Day 2

Step 1. Once again, videotaping between the researcher and the participant occurred in a converted classroom, but on Day 2, taping also took place in a board room. This day, with a digital recorder set up for one-on-one dialogue prior to the entry of the researcher and the participant, the recording equipment was again controlled externally (from outside the secured room) by remote, merely, turning equipment on and off. This was executed by a professional audio/video engineer to ensure that the integrity of both the interviewer (researcher) and the interviewee (participant) were respected and that the content was captured in its most natural state.

Step 2. Upon completion of each interview, the recording equipment was reset by the audio/video engineer to resume the process for the next one-on-one taping. The researcher used a narrative approach that prioritized the voices of non-traditional students and their lived experiences, thus creating a socially constructed reality where storytelling is the preferred method of sense making (Auvinen et al., 2013). For this reason, the data took on a narrative form characteristic of videotaped and audiotaped stories and testimonies; the content was later transcribed for clarity and included all 14 participants in this study. The collected data consisted of first hand stories or narratives about the events in these students' lives.

Coding of Interviews

All interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and checked for accuracy against the videotaped interview. Two professional educators familiar with the student population formed the coding team. The researcher employed Merrill and West's (2009) thematic steps, as well as Eriksson and Kovalainen's (2008) thematic analysis, to identify themes emerging from the transcripts and videotapes. All interviews were read by at least one coder in addition to the researcher. A thematic categorical approach was taken in coding the transcripts. Once all coding was completed, the researcher worked independently to analyze and interpret the data. Finally, stories that emerged from the student interviews were incorporated into the interpretive report.

Ethical Considerations and Procedures to Collect and Handle Data

To insure the ethical nature of this study, I acquired an informed consent from my participants assuring them that their names and other identifying information would remain completely confidential. A secured lock file cabinet was obtained for the safekeeping of interviews of all participants involved in the study. These are important ethical steps in the

imperative in qualitative interviewing and the research process. Merriam (2009) stated, "Qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be of high standards and their code of ethics strict" (p. 231). Assuredly, the informed consent form is a document that obliges ethical protection of the participant during the interview process and beyond. Warren (2002) stated, "From an IRB perspective, human subject regulation of interview research seeks to protect respondents from such things as invasion of privacy, breaches of confidentiality or anonymity, and distress caused by topics raised in the interview process itself" (p. 89).

Furthermore, speculations of participants becoming highly emotional and/or psychologically distressed during the interview process are possible dilemmas that researchers may encounter. Should any participants experience episode(s) of emotional or psychological distress during our meeting (the interview process), as a credible resource, I prepared a list of non-profit community agencies that were made available to assist with coping and any emotional or psychological issues that may emerge. This application makes clear how the moral and ethical nature of the research must remain a priority, and the emotional or psychological stability of the participant must not be compromised—on any level—regardless of how valuable obtained data is regarded. The welfare and livelihood of every participant is to be respected and not compromised.

Potential Limitations

The demographics of Kenmore & Kokin College campuses make up seven locations within the western New York area; however, this study focused on those students who were participants in our Pathways and Pre-Collegiate programs exclusively on the site of the campus of Kenmore & Kokin College. Growingly, within an urban population, literacy programs have

been the catalyst for achieving High School Equivalency Diplomas and entering college. Some critics do not view this alternative diploma in the same light as those earned by traditional high school (THS) graduates. By design, it was the purpose of this study to monitor the process for three semesters of GED graduates after they had completed a required English and math course in an urban for-profit college (Gunby, 2012). This particular study, then, was limited to students enrolled in the Pre-Collegiate Academy and, thus, reflects a small percentage of the campus's current student population of those students who began in the spring semester of 2010. Alternatively, the study concentrated on student centered learning where a positive environment was created for all students, providing the academic support necessary to their success at Kenmore & Kokin College. The uninterrupted continuity of these students' academic experiences was supported by assuring that each student in the study had one academic advisor from the beginning of their involvement in this program through its completion, coming to commencement upon graduation from the college with an associate's degree. Pre-testing and post-testing, along with extensive tutoring sessions, was also limited to this same group of students in an attempt to better prepare them for a college readiness curriculum. Hence, daily math and English courses—at the college readiness level—were attended for 15 weeks to increase their comprehension skills, which were not afforded to all new students seeking admission into the college.

Significantly, the impressive bonds and emotional attachments that developed during this process, creating a family-like atmosphere, facilitated students being able to express their personal feelings—relative to attending college—and stay the course, knowing they would not be judged; rather, these students would be supported and nurtured through this relentless (academic) experience. The following timidities and/or trepidations were discussed weekly as

part of a guided support group, facilitated by this researcher. This opportunity was not available to other first generation students entering Kenmore & Kokin College. Non-traditional students returned to postsecondary education to develop academic and job skills. With this knowledge, provided by researchers, on the effect of background demographics and the completion of this program of study, designated stakeholders, instructors, and advisers were able to help meet the needs of students by providing a well-coordinated approach to social and academic growth and development.

Summary

This chapter provided an informational overview of non-traditional students, predominately African American, enrolled at Kenmore & Kokin College in New York. In search of identifying the motivational factors and persistence levels from non-traditional students' pre-academic and post-academic experiences, the researcher has gathered and synthesized the fundamental outcomes of discussions, feedback, and open communication, the voice of students—echoed in their own vernacular—as they identified the various obstacles and factors that presented the greatest challenges. They shared their candid encounters, incidents, and personal euphemisms that have contributed to their persistence to graduation. The voices of these students are celebrated as an accomplishment for themselves and their dedication to an environment, which captures and supports a culture of completion.

Findings

This chapter presents the findings and emergent themes resultant from interviews of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students represent a growing population in higher education, yet our understanding of the unique factors that predict their success have not improved. The scope of this study will include an intense examination of the essence of the lived experiences of non-traditional students, providing a better understanding of how they cope as adult learners in addressing the challenges of accomplishing success in an academic environment. It is the purpose of this study to advance the conversation beyond the goal of access to and equality of education toward identifying the support and resources needed to mitigate the challenge of non-traditional students; through a narrative methodology, this study and its findings will focus on the determinants of college completion, upward mobility, and economic empowerment for African American, Latin American, Native American, and under advantaged Caucasian American non-traditional students.

Participants in this study were first generation college students who were required to complete their New York State General Educational Development while working toward an associate's degree. All participants have participated in an educational program that offered personalized services designed to address barriers faced by students of their identified population. Through in-depth interviewing of individuals who are alumni of non-traditional programming and who have experienced the challenges of entering educational programs as non-traditional students, it is intended that a deeper understanding of the circumstances and educational environments that fail underserved populations, as well as those that contribute to their success, will emerge. The voices of these alumni will be celebrated as this study recognizes their accomplishment, their dedication to an environment that captures and supports a culture of

completion. Finally, the raw narrative accounts of the participants' experiences will be viewed through theoretical lenses to interpret the individual metamorphoses of students and the aggregated emergent themes.

Furthermore, the fourth chapter presents the findings of this study and begins with a reflective assessment of each participant. Following each participant's reflective assessment, student narratives are analyzed according to the themes that emerged from the selective tellings of the participants involved. Next, the psycho-social stages found in the participants' stories, in conjunction with the various intersecting themes, work as tools toward understanding the metamorphosis participants underwent in transitioning from their previous educational failures to the completion of their degrees. Each of these sections is included to provide a deeper understanding of the circumstances which contribute to the failures and successes of the participants involved.

Reflective Assessments of Participants

The findings of this study were derived from one-on-one interviews with 14 participants. These interview sessions covered the establishment of a connection with each participant and a conversation focused on triumphs and challenges while growing up, along with personal experiences as Ability to Benefit non-traditional students at Kenmore & Kokin College. As described earlier in the third chapter, Ability to Benefit students are those who are admitted on a limited basis to the college, though they do not have a high school diploma or a GED but meet the requirements of the Federal Department of Education. In order to be admitted to the college, the prospective student must achieve a minimum score on a standardized test. Ability to Benefit students are internally referred to as Achieve students at Kenmore & Kokin College, Achieve being an acronym for Another Chance Initiative for Education Vocation or Employment. In this

chapter, 14 participants will be introduced. Out of courtesy and respect for the anonymity of these individuals, the students chose their own pseudonyms. Among the many pseudonyms considered, this is a list of the pseudonyms chosen: Sharon, Jennifer, Marissa, Michael, Jack, Aloha, Charles, Martine, Tia, Alexandria, Mike Delta, Mariah, Sky, and Sophia.

Each student profile in this chapter is structured to be open-ended, thereby permitting readers to analyze, reflect, and walk in shoes of these students as they describe their struggles to accomplish their goals. Many of the participants who took part in this study often cited nurturing relationships, partnerships, or reliance on undeviating faith and their spirituality to see them through this stressful process. In order to discuss the complexities of this student population with respect to the development of the Pre-Collegiate Academy (high school dropouts entering the program from our pathways program), one must consider a profile that reflects a large portion of non-traditional students seeking educational opportunities. While it is tempting to dwell on the ways in which young adult learners are limited by their lack of skill and knowledge, a more complex portrayal of their characteristic strengths along with their weaknesses are required. This group of young adult learners has frequently managed to withstand more than their fair share of life's difficulties (Wyckoff, Cooney, Djakovic, & McClanahan, 2000). Notably, these students have had little or no money to develop powerful connections. They have seen too many of their friends and family members come to sad or tragic ends (including imprisonment and premature death). However, in the face of adversity, they still keep returning to schools and programs in order to resume their education in an effort to get their lives together and get back to planning for their future. Moreover, students, throughout their explanations, detail their trials and errors and successes and failures with the social systems out of which such dilemmas grow. Thus, many narratives contain how young adult learners are confronted, on a

daily basis, with additional factors that impede their progress and development in obtaining a post-secondary education degree.

As a result of this dilemma, each student profile in this chapter is structured to be open-ended, thereby permitting readers to analyze, reflect on triumphs and challenges as adult learners attempting to balance their academic goals along with the activities and encounters of daily living. The current state of affairs in education reveals that almost three quarters are confronted with the reality of challenges encountered by non-traditional students (Choy, 2002). Many of the challenges acknowledged in the literature were reflected in the stories of the participants in this study. Child care and scheduling around work hours are merely two of the barriers that single mothers face. Like the participants of this study, Reder (1988) pointed out that "non-traditional students participate in remedial courses during their first year of post-secondary education. . . . The same pattern holds true for remedial reading, writing and math courses" (p.141). Similarly, these participants' stories indicated their lack of preparedness to meet even the academic demands of school. The participants were equally challenged with attendance issues and poor self-esteem, which often led to attitudinal problems. Further, they had little awareness of positive social skills that would assist in meeting these challenges of daily living. As a result of such issues, many participants brought an attitude of hostility, hopelessness, and distrust. Their stories reflected that academic instructors and advisors with nurturing support were able to rebuild their self-confidence and self-respect.

Emergent Themes From Participants' Narratives

This section of the study takes the narrative accounts of participants' experiences and pulls the evolving themes from the rich content of their stories. These accounts are viewed through the multi-varied theoretical lenses that were presented throughout the literature review

and designed to interpret the individual metamorphoses of the students and the aggregated emergent themes that have determined or influenced their educational histories. First, I will discuss the psycho-social stages that emerged from the participants' stories, followed by the various themes that surfaced as they described their metamorphoses from their previous educational failures to the completion of their degrees.

Psycho-Social Stages

Given the use of the intervening success model (to include Pathways, PCA, and Achieve) employed at Kenmore & Kokin College, findings suggest that many participants' accounts followed a natural path of episodic phasing. Thus, this interpretation of their experiences should be considered episodic, staged, and/or phased. Stage 1 consists of Pre- Intervention-Cyclical Failures, which are indicative of participants' reflections leading up to the enrollment into the intervening success models. Stage 2 or During Intervention-Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline provides a view into students' experiences while enrolled in the programs (and after each milestone of achievement). Finally, Stage 3 or Post Intervention/Culture of Completion examines and evaluates how participants report their feelings and attitudes upon earning their certificate GED and, subsequently, an associate's degree.

Using these stages to define these participants' emotional transitions allowed the researcher to establish and identify these three major macro-themes: Cyclical Failure, Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline, and A Culture of Completion, in addition to the sub themes that describe their intimate and provocative narrative voices. These narratives further lend themselves to students' paranoia and distrust but, in the end, become foundational in their work and ultimate triumph. These sub themes will become evident, as many students reflect on past

historical accounts, particularly in terms of the way they viewed themselves and, subsequently, how they created and co-created the necessary habits for learning, success, and positive change.

Consistent Themes

In order to accurately ascertain the themes presented in the narratives, a second look at this study's research questions is necessary.

1. Is student self-identity linked to academic achievement and successful outcomes?
2. What role did faculty support and/or classroom environment play in student persistence in seeking admission into college—in particular, Kenmore & Kokin College?
3. What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their postsecondary education at proprietary colleges?

Using these questions as guiding principles, the researcher performed open, unstructured interviews. After reviewing the responses of each participant, the researcher was able to identify four core themes by which to view the participants' responses. These core themes will appear in each of the three macro-stages as dominant preceptors; they will show a different reaction among each of the three stages as movement occurs. These preceptor themes are Personal Life Experiences, Support Systems, Self-Identity, and Self-Validation. The data reflected that both the external influences and internal motivations of the participants increased their willingness to change. Definitions of these themes are as follows:

Personal Life Experiences: This theme represents the personal challenges and triumphs of these non-traditional student participants, carried through each of the stages, including post intervention. *Personal*, in this context, describes factors and forces that impacted the participants' activities of daily living which reflect on the reasons for leaving high school early. The reflections shared give insight into the influences these experiences had on the participants at each stage. Sub-themes include the following:

- Academic Failure,
- Home Environment,
- Mental & Physical Health, and
- Death and Dying.

Social Support Network Systems: This theme covers the existence and role of social support systems in the lives of participants. One of the characteristics depicted in the *Universe of the Non-traditional Students* (Buglione, 2012) is Isolation or Lack of Social Network. Contrarily, however, many of the participants noted some sort of social network or support system during each stage, whether positive or negative. The sub-themes include the following:

- Influential Relationships,
- Personal Experiences,
- Faculty/Staff Involvement,
- Familial Support, and
- Spirituality.

Self-Identity: The use of Self-Identity as a core theme is paramount to charting any measurable gains in the participants' lives as viewed by the participants. The evidenced academic achievements of obtaining both GEDs and associate's degrees are by themselves not as contextual as understanding each student's evaluation of self while going through the process. Sub-themes that embodied the voices of the participants include the following:

- Fear and Failure,
- Single Parent Household,
- Achiever,
- Role Model, and

- Servant Leadership.

Self-Validation: A major tenant of the intervention programs was for students to "seek validation of self through educational experiences by using divergent thinking and creativity to construct new educational narratives of positive language and collaborative communication" (Kenmore & Kokin, 2011). This theme charts the elements of self-validation in the narratives that provide insight into the effectiveness of this claim. Sub-themes include the following:

- Seeking Change,
- Epiphanies,
- Maturation,
- Proving "Them" Wrong, and
- Seeking New Challenges.

These four core themes will be viewed at each of the three stages (Pre, During, and Post). However, not all of the sub-themes are present in each stage. For example, a sub-theme of Self-Identity in the Pre Stage is Single Parent Households. However, in the During Stage, a sub-theme for Self-Identity is Failing Forward (see Figure 4.1 for an illustrative model of the stages, themes, and sub-themes).

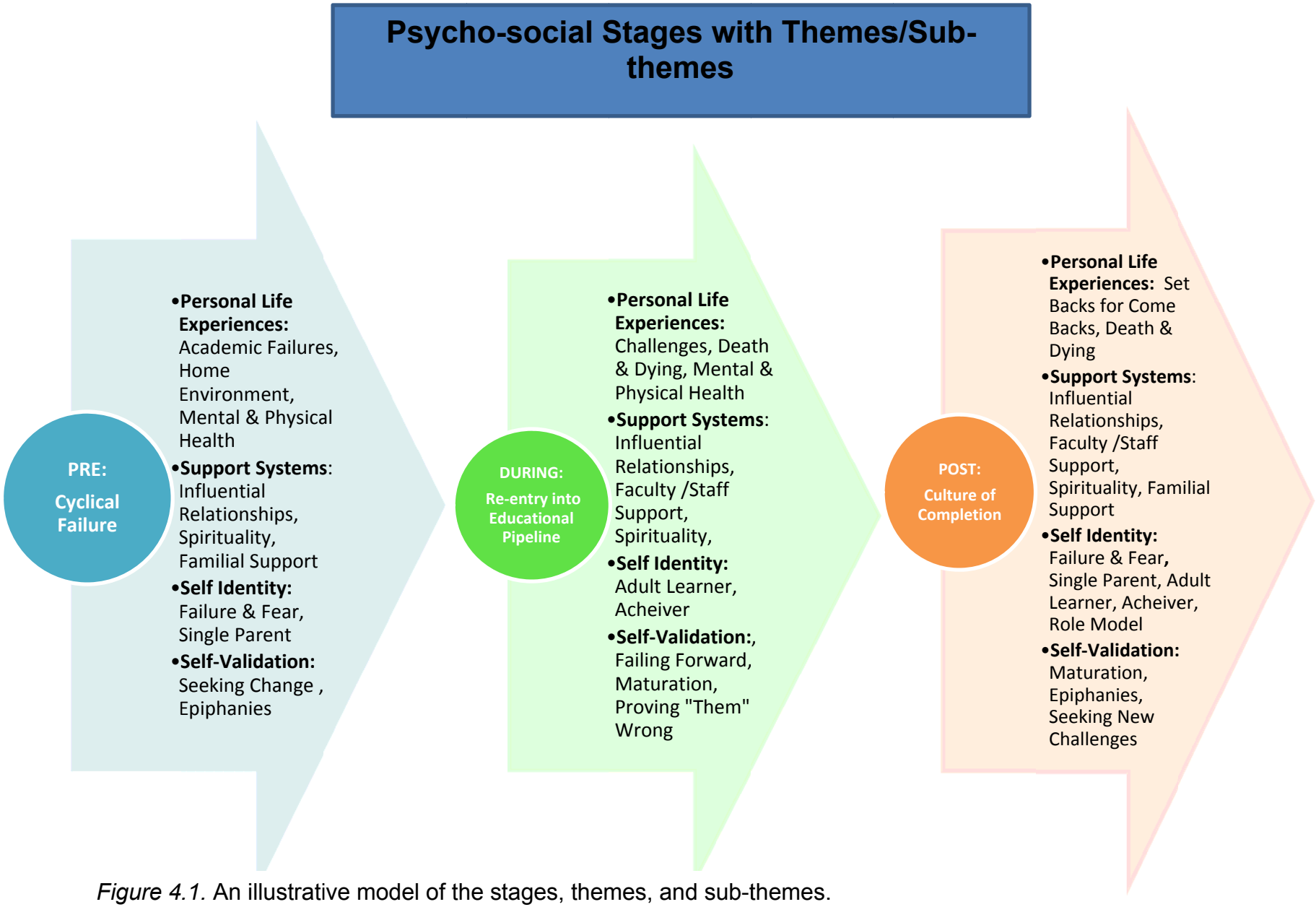

Figure 4.1. An illustrative model of the stages, themes, and sub-themes.

Psycho-Social Stages/Themes Stage 1: Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures

Cyclical failures express disproportionality with people who do not have adequate personal resources to meet their needs and with communities with large populations of people who require assistance. Stage 1: Pre-Intervention–Cyclical Failures considered participants' reflections leading up to the enrollment into the intervening success models (see Table 4.1 for an overview of Stage 1).

Table 4.1

Psycho-Social Stages/Themes Stage 1

Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures			
Personal Life Experiences	**Support Systems**	**Self-Identity**	**Self-Validation**
Home Environment	Influential Relationships	Fear and Failure	Epiphanies
Academic Challenges	Spirituality	Single Parent	Seeking Change
Mental and Physical Health	Familial support		

As the name suggests, participants indicated many forces and influences which led to a series of poor decision-making prior to intervention. Subsequently, as participants began to share their stories, it became evident that each of them had a mindset change that contributed to the decision to seek an education. Some of the factors that surfaced were home environment, academic challenges, and mental and physical health. The coordination of all stages, themes, and sub-themes collectively played a role in showcasing a larger systemic dilemma that relates not only to the silent epidemic of the nation's dropout rate of the urban poor but also to the students' individual choices and the educational institutions offering a postsecondary degree or credential. Poverty remained a dominant theme in the participants' stories and their understanding that social mobility was linked to educational success.

Stage 1a: Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures—Personal Life Experiences

Home environment. Participants in this study shared stories detailing their home lives, both childhood and leading up to intervention, in rather vivid detail and with striking descriptions. Michael, who was raised in foster care, gave very intense summaries of his experience prior to Kenmore & Kokin College. He reports that "I was having it rough when I was young . . . I loved school. Basically, struggled to put my life together for me and my brothers." Immediately, there's a connection, not just with Michael's background, but with his home environment. He notes the importance of family: "My mom at the time was addicted to drugs and was incarcerated at that time. So, it was me and my oldest brother. He is two years older than me. I had two younger brothers. My youngest brother went off to live with my grandmother." Michael's story of a broken home life, fragmented by drugs and absent parenting, mirrors other stories of troubled spaces. Strong, secure relationships help stabilize children's behavior and provide the core guidance needed to build lifelong social skills. Children who grow up with such relationships learn healthy, appropriate emotional responses to everyday situations. But children raised in poor households often fail to learn these responses, often to the detriment of their school performance. For instance, Jack, the only male Caucasian participant, had many living transitions from the age of 17. His home environment, coupled with his educational history, was, at best, unstable.

> I got kicked out of my house at 17, so . . . and then, I got put into an alternative school, which was more blacks than the high school that I was at, which . . . there were buddy-buddy at the alternative school. It just wasn't for me. So, I left. [I] used to live in a group home for a while, TSI and stuff, so I made it through, from there I made it to the mission and then . . . Little Portion Friary.

Jack accounted that these were not "good" programs; however, they provided him with shelter.

Marteen, single mother of three, faced issues of domestic violence, which cost her dearly, even up to the time of the interview.

> When I talk about my children, it makes me sad. I was in an abusive relationship. My baby's father was very mean and abused me and the children. So they [Child Protective Services] ended up taking away my children because I had no family support. My children were like snatched away from me . . . They are all in foster placement. Daymani she just turned eight and Naveya turned nine and Barron is eleven years old.

The home environments of Michael, Jack, and Marteen convey the significance of family structure, economic deprivation, and quality of care-giving in relation to an individual's ability to continue education. The importance of a stable home environment and the connection to strong and stable familial relationships proved irreplaceable.

Academic challenges. Many interviewees described instances where they faced academic challenges in elementary school. Charles felt that his childhood had "obstacles where it kind of prevented [him] from going to college or even getting out of high school." He further noted that "being labeled a special education student does have its own unique challenges as well. My mom told me I didn't [begin] speaking until I was six years old." Charles was the only participant who technically graduated high school with a special education diploma. However, he felt as if he accomplished nothing: "Technically, I did graduate from high school, but it was like I had no degree [diploma]. It [would be] nearly impossible for me to even attend college . . . I didn't have the education level to keep up with the work."

Mariah, who is dyslexic, had one academic challenge that kept her from graduating high school: "High school math was a struggle, and the only reason [course wise] why I didn't graduate was because I didn't pass the math, and for me, math was my worst subject." Another participant, Marissa, disclosed that she was just being a teenager, and didn't feel like going to school: "Oh, like most teenagers, I just didn't want to go. I didn't want to finish high school. I

just dropped out. And I . . . 11th grade . . . so I had one more year to go, and I just . . . was silly and young." But it is not always immaturity, or simply not "wanting to go," which held students back from attending school. One of the narratives which displayed the complexity of choosing to be present in the classroom is Alexandria's. She opened up to explain how her living situation, the admissions process, and the shame of attending high school with younger peers discouraged her from going back to high school:

> [I lived in a] detention home. I went wrong. I was 15; they . . . sent my transcripts, so [I was 17 waiting for them to send them.] I just said never mind. By 18, I just said forget it. I'm about to be 19 in the ninth grade. I didn't go to high school.

As alone as she may have felt in her educational journey, Alexandria was not the only student who reported such experiences. Facing continuing hardships and debilitating social conditions can be overwhelming and depressing for any individual, and numerous studies document that poverty and the associated disadvantages negatively affects student learning and achievement. Mike Delta also missed high school at the hands of the system:

> So the day I thought I was supposed to graduate . . . went to the school. They said I wasn't graduating. My Mom asked why? They said because I hadn't been in school. The home school teacher 'posed to bring my homework and everything I'm doing to the school. They said that home school teacher didn't even exist. So, number one, who was this lady that's coming to my house everyday 'posed to be…a home school teacher? Number two, it discouraged me. I'm like . . . I don't even care anymore, so I stopped going to school. I was like forget it. I'm 'posed graduate . . . didn't graduate on time.

Some believe that the disappointing performance of our educational system stems in large part from the challenges that poor children face outside of school, and, clearly, is found layered in the narratives of Charles and Mariah. Differences in family background help explain a large share of the variation in academic achievement outcomes across students, but the following narratives further shed light on academic challenges, too. These challenges seem to work in combination with turbulent outside forces that trouble students' lives and, doubly, create

considerable friction for them as they navigate the outside world and the red tape of attending school. In the cases of Alexandria and Mike Delta, negative feelings such as shame, intimidation, and discouragement all play a powerful role but, for the most part, remain hidden from plain sight.

Mental and physical health. Health and education are joined in an inextricable way, and many who experience poor health commonly report difficulty learning throughout their school careers. Aside from learning disabilities, some participants in this study had experienced illnesses that contributed to their inability to complete high school. Sharon became a mother in high school and suffered from post-partum depression. She was actually enrolled in an intervention program at the time but lacked the motivation to utilize its potential. She said, "I went to St. Augustine when it was for the pregnant girls…that's where I went when I was pregnant . . . but still like I said I had my daughter. I was tired. I ain't feel like doing nothing. I didn't feel like being bothered. I took care of her and I quit school."

Similar to Sharon's struggles with depression, Mariah disclosed various physical health issues that held her back from an early age. She says, "I was born six months early . . . I weighed a pound half and he [my brother] weighed two and a half. We're twins. We were not expected to live through the night, but we're both 33." In the interview, Mariah further describes her brother while offering a window into a troubled history of physical and mental health: "He is mentally challenged but you would never know that if you met him. He is the other part of my heart, but we've both overcome a lot of challenges and difficulties." Later, she discloses some of her own medical history: "I've had 26 surgeries to lengthen my leg because when we were born my brother sat on my leg and which made my leg bone grow curved and they had to break it, re-lengthen it." She goes on to clarify that "This is while we were still in my mother. And when we

came out they [the doctors] said, 'Well, we're going to have to cut off her leg,' and she [her mother] said, 'No, we're just going to have the surgery.'" Mariah's health challenges made her resilient. However, as a result of her failures in school, she suffered from depression: "It was also very depressing because when you can't learn like you want to [you] think it's something wrong with you." Additionally, she "suffered from two forms which are epileptic, and non-epileptic seizures." She carefully described her experience, saying, "This has greatly impacted my life: I have to really once again balance my stress levels, be careful of what I eat, really have to stay well rested." Like Mariah, Mike Delta also experienced a severe leg injury, and as a result, was homeschooled for a short period of time before deciding to completely drop out of high school.

> But yeah, I was walking home slipped on the ice and broke my leg in 3 places, and I broke my ankle . . . broke this one, so I was out of school for the rest of my life. I was a junior, so . . . I was getting home schooled. The teacher was coming to the house, everything.

Many, if not most of the obstacles to school completion—teen pregnancy, school violence, hunger, homelessness, unmet physical, and mental health needs—are the same obstacles that generally exist as hindrances uniquely linked to overall health and well-being. As with most health disparities, the odds of dropping out of school are disproportionately stacked against the types of students interviewed in this study. Being that the following participants report living in or being from communities not only where social inequities are most pronounced but also where communities house impediments related to physical and mental health care, there is a palpable reason to believe such factors played a powerful role in determining their ability to finish their education. The cases of Sharon, Mariah, and Mike Delta shed light on the need for proper health care in conjunction with other kinds of support as such

barriers that impede their health and well-being, also negatively impact their chances for completing their education.

Stage 1b: Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures—Support Systems

A major challenge in the educational system today is improving the quality of instruction with regard to challenges such as concentrated poverty, family instability, and early exposure to violence—all impacting students' educational experiences. These are but a few hardships typical of growing up in an urban environment. From an early age urban children are confronted with a series of obstacles as they attempt to achieve academic, personal, and social success. For this reason, support systems are a common theme in determining the success or failure of a student. The participants in this study all mentioned experiences with people, places, and things that provided some sort of backing or stimulus in their Pre-Intervention lives.

Influential relationships. As human beings, our relationships are a fundamental source of learning and are commonly linked back to powerful decisions that we make in our lives. Many socio-cultural factors play a role in human relationships in and outside of the classroom, and the emotional bond that unifies two (or more) people around some shared concern is more often not charged with enabling, facilitative powers. Jennifer, the oldest participant in this study, was quite established prior to her search for a GED: "I didn't like school; school wasn't on my agenda. [I] always had a job, always made money. I was a bill collector for 20 years, so I really didn't need an education for that." But, she also stated, "[my] boyfriend wanted me to try out for a GED. He said I was very smart." The encouragement offered by Jennifer's boyfriend is telling. Though she seemed financially stable, it was the recommendation from an outside party that drove her toward education. That is, a person's sense of inner security and alliance with their

peers, when charged with the appropriate concern, can lead to motivation. This is not at all uncommon. Similarly, Marteen's friend planted a seed:

> A friend of mind [went] to Kenmore & Kokin College before [me]. She invited me to her graduation which was awesome. I looked at her and 'I asked, how did she get there?' She told me about the Pathways Program. So, I came down . . . did my own little research and found out that I could come into the Pathways Program.

Both of these stories are marked by support and backing. Whereas Jennifer's narrative functions on the power of suggestion, Marteen's experience of watching a peer succeed gave her added courage and confidence that she, too, could take the next step. Importantly, it seems that the valuing of one's interpersonal interactions as people can help us to discover the worth in ourselves and the belief that we can change things. Marteen's experience speaks to the potential humanizing value in even brief and task-focused encounters between one person and another; her friend's success mirrored the potential for her own, and, thus, in a brief exhibition of another's accomplishment, like her own reasoning for breathing new life into her situation.

But Marteen wasn't the only other participant who spoke of such highly charged and significant relationships. Additionally, Mariah spoke of interpersonal bonds that inspired her to return to school, but this time the encouragement came not from a peer or the modeling of another's success, but from a supportive family member. Her relationship with her mother was critical throughout her life: "My mother is a very strong woman and I get a lot of my strength and determination from her." It's no surprise then that when Mariah links her resiliency to her mother's "strength" and "determination." After all, to determine the role that familial ties and one's emotional investment play in relation to coming back to school, or further, in pushing forward toward completion, are marked not just in our relationships as catalysts but also in the

enabling dynamism that grows the freedom and support necessary to take risks and complete large tasks.

However, not all participants spoke highly of the influences in their lives. Conversely, some participants spoke of the lack of influential relationships in their lives. For instance, Tia stated the following:

> I won't say that I dropped out, it was just that it was a lot of things, was going on . . . during my senior year. [It] was just . . . like I lost a whole lot of energy and stuff. And I didn't have that push . . . like, you know you have people in your life that really push you. . . . [To tell you] like . . . don't give up, don't give in, don't throw in the towel. I didn't have that. . . .in my life, I really didn't.

Relationships are obviously not all that we need, but they are foundational. Relationships are critical in shaping one's well-being, as noted by the participant's response that her decision to, at first, put off her education was driven largely by her fear that she was alone in pursuing it. In this respect, the admission that relationships are not a substitute for the opportunities and material things people need in order to flourish needs to be honored, but, doubly, our ability to connect with others, whether it be in a positive or negative respect, aids in integrating our identity with our collective understanding of normal or acceptable, further shaping how we perceive ourselves in the communities in which we live, work, and operate. Such interpersonal contact can be extremely influential, having the potential to turn a student toward or away from engaging in or completing education.

Spirituality. Spirituality is an elusive word with a variety of definitions. For our purposes, it becomes useful in that it is grounded in the human desire to be connected with something larger than the human ego. The interviewees in this study often attributed positive outcomes or the desire to change to a spiritual belief that God wanted them to do better. Mariah believed that divine intervention prompted her educational journey: "I saw a commercial with

Kenmore & Kokin College pathways program and the Lord said, 'Go there and try it.' And I did." Furthermore, strong spiritual grounding is a familial concept for her: "Without our family and our faith in God, we wouldn't be able to do this." It is telling that Mariah spoke with her pastor and never forgot his words:

> My pastor . . . supported me when I told him I was going back to school. He told me to 'Press, push and pursue. You can achieve excellence . . . If you put God first, He will not make you last.' Ever since he said this it just stuck with me.

A spiritual crisis arises when we find ourselves in the grip of something larger than society's expectations or the ego's needs. The challenge of such a crisis is always clear, though finding a way through never is: do we follow the soul's calling, or do we bend to the forces of deformation around us and within us? Challenges of this sort are well-known in the world of education and point to patterns of behavior that either have us wilt at the feet of friction or reach deeper for purpose and meaning in our journey. The fact that Mariah's spiritual connections spoke so powerfully early on speaks to spirituality's influence to free students of the cyclical and recurring patterns that restrict their potentiality.

Familial support. Familial support and encouragement can often be essential to the achieving positive outcomes in the world of education. The interviews in this study revealed that students had strong familial experiences, both motivating and hindering. Sharon came from a strong matriarchal family and attributes much of her strength to this: "I always see my grandmother as the backbone of the family. Then my mom, my grandmother and my aunt. [There are] mainly women in our family, so this is how I turned out strong willed." Michael's account of how he met his father, while in foster care, speaks to his view of the importance of family, even at a young age.

> I was in foster care due to my mom issues, so I never really seen my father. [When I was around 7] she told me one day when she was locked up where my dad stayed at and everything and said to myself, 'I was going to go and find him.' I had to go to the store for my . . . foster mother. . . . I was on my bike to the store. . . . My dad . . . lived about a mile away so I was like…' I'm just take my bike I'll ride over there to see'…Knocked on the door and . . . that's when I met my whole [paternal] family. It was one of my cousin's birthday party . . . they greeted me with open arms, they didn't really know where I was at because of the foster care situation. . . . My uncles, they saw me first . . . knew who I was…My dad…his house was like two doors down…They walked me down to my father's house. They walked in the house and he was sitting back watching TV and when they told him "We found somebody, guess who we found' 'Who?' He seen me he just jumped and ran to me and grabbed me. He just picked me up and he was like 'Where did y'all find him? Where you been what happened? How did you get here?' I told him the whole story . . . 'I just had to see you' and from then on you know me and my dad been close ever since.

The primary responsibility for the development and well-being of children lies within the family. Just as children need to be seen in the context of their families, families are best understood and supported in the context of neighborhoods and communities. Sharon's strength is reaffirmed by a long lineage of strong female figures. This strength provides a background centered in resiliency. Michael's account conveys the drive to seek out and be accepted by his father and the importance of their meeting, and Michael sharing his story demonstrates how at a young age he took control of his destiny. This trait would later influence his educational journey as he sought out mentorship and took responsibility for his learning. To add to these patterns, both Jack's parents and Aloha's younger sister encouraged them to pursue high school equivalency and college. The impact of family gave these students a template by which to understand the world pre-intervention and, with the varied expectations that marked those unique experiences, gave them a foundation to believe that what had not yet materialized was possible.

Stage 1c: Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures—Self-Identity

Taking the time to consider the spectrum of issues that these students navigate on a daily basis became key to understanding how past histories and cyclical failures had affected students.

It became apparent that past histories and the cyclical failure of the pre-educational journey set a precedent for what students would expect of their overall education and, more importantly, of themselves. What strikes a fire in a learner, after all, is commonly not just a thirst for knowledge or entrance into a vocation, but also a self-interest—the consideration of how their studies will prove valuable, not just in the context of a classroom, but in their daily lives. For some, this consists of tapping into the story of the self. What is the story that these students tell themselves about themselves? Are they failures? Are they successes in waiting? Sometimes pursuing one's education has less to do with the information students come in contact with and more to do with how that information becomes something almost inextricable from whom they are. Exploring these multiple and sometimes opposing identities allowed me to gain an even greater appreciation for the capabilities of these students. The participants' reflective statements of self in Stage 1 are crucial to this analysis; they provide the baseline for measuring self-affect, or the level of positive change in self-identity.

Fear and failure. Two latent themes were evident in almost all of the accounts: fear and failure. When asked to describe the journey to their GEDs, most respondents recalled feeling some level of apprehension and recounted a previous failure or feeling of ineptitude. Sharon felt guilty and ashamed because she dropped out of high school. Jennifer was "discouraged because I'm older." Aloha stated, "I['ve] always had low self-esteem when it came to education. I don't know. It was because I dropped out when I was 14 and I wasn't focused. I never thought I would have it, never. I had been in five different GED program since I was 21, 22 years old." Interestingly enough, however, Marteen's childhood experience with education was not necessarily negative, but unbalanced:

> I love the numbers. I love math since I was a kid. I got a key to the city in third grade for having one of the highest scores out of five people in the country in math. I had a college credit in math in fifth grade, like I really just liked math, like math has been my everything. Math and science, because I knew math and science was going to make me money not trying to be funny but I was taught that, so.

However, after dropping out of high school, Marteen had made several attempts to obtain her GED, but to no avail: "I would always get an opportunity to take the pre-test which is called the predictor, and if you passed the predictor, you would move forward to take the GED exam; however, I never was capable of taking the official test." Similarly, Michael also made attempts, but they would end in frustration:

> I really couldn't focus at the other GED programs, because that was the only thing that was hard for me to learn was how to build an essay. I never was good at it, and it was like they were impatient with me. They wouldn't sit down and help me, build you the sentences. I can tell they would get frustrated with me and I really wanted to avoid any confrontation so I would get mad at them and say nothing.

Mariah would reinforce the previously mentioned account, but her personal struggle would separate her from other participants; she reflected on her high school experiences and frustrations of having to learn "differently" because of dyslexia:

> [Even] With all of the tutoring, extra help and everything, it was really rough and really hard to be able to learn and comprehend math. I had to go to summer school to pass it and I still didn't pass it in summer school. It was a real struggle in school, because I didn't like not being like everybody else. I just want[ed] to be normal. I wanted to be able to read like everybody else and not have to struggle, because I knew I was smart, because I have an extensive vocabulary, because I was always reading. I didn't pass it in summer school, so I just got depressed. I just sat around probably, because I felt like a failure, because I know I did everything I was supposed to do in short of just giving up, and I still didn't make it.

Jack also had a fear of starting: "I thought I was going to get into college and fail out. That was my biggest fear. It stopped me like from even trying to go for my GED at one point."

What is repetitive and debilitating to most of these participants' educational experiences is that before they ever stepped foot back in the classroom, they had to negotiate their previous

perceptions of failure; they had to face a history negative feedback and rejection. Often times, however, when it is not fear of failure or rejection driving these negative expectations for higher education, some students additionally reported long periods of time away from the environment that spurred a sense of risk and anxiety that came with their return. Marissa's reflection differed from the majority of the participants, but in the same vein, spoke to this apprehension. When asked how long it took her to come back to school she said:

> I want to say about over 20 years for real. Because, I used to be a carnival worker. I traveled with James E Straits all up and down the East Coast, and I decided 'alright it's time to go home.' And that's when I actually wanted to start looking into getting my GED." Although Jennifer felt discouraged later in her educational journey about her age, her major reason for leaving high school was similar to Marissa's. She notes that "I didn't like school and then I went into a girl's school and that just even made it worse . . . that wasn't where I wanted to be. I wanted to go to East high school, but because of family tradition, I had to go to a girl's school, because that's where my mother went.

In the pre-intervention stage, fear and failure are powerful themes. Making the decision to return to college or begin a college degree program is major and one that is not made easily. Previous experiences stand as a template; they set and build strong expectations for what getting an education can mean to each individual. Moving into stage 2, students would have to grapple with the pressures and predisposed notions for what getting an education could offer, but fear was not the only obstacle holding them back.

Single parent. Though many students face challenges on the way to a college degree, low-income, single mothers and single fathers face an especially daunting journey. More often than not, they must juggle their educational responsibilities with others, not limited to, but including childcare, employment, and household responsibilities. Roughly 54% of the participants identified themselves as being single parents. Taking care of children was a huge part of their responsibility and, in many cases, contributed to their non-completion of high

school. Sharon stated, regarding her oldest daughter, "I took care of her and I quit school, but I wish I never had." Similarly, Marteen explained:

> I dropped out of high school because I had a child. I actually made it to my senior year, but I had a baby and it prevented me from going to school . . . I breastfed my daughter. It took her one year and a half to get off the breast milk. By time graduation and finals, I wasn't able to make it and this prevented me from graduation high school. I waited years before I returned to school in search for a GED program.

Jennifer continued to reinforce this trend confirming, "I dropped out in 1971, then I had my oldest daughter that year. Two years later, I had my little daughter. Three years after that I have my son," and as Aloha reveals, she made it through nearly three years of high school with two children:

> I dropped out of high school; I [already] had two children. I had my first child at the age of 14 and then I had my second child two years later, so I had a two-year –old and a newborn in the 11th grade. My oldest is 30, my second one is 27, the next one is 25, and my son is 21 and I have two twin girls that are about to be 20 years old . . . but I didn't want my kids…was always afraid they were going to take my kids away from me… So [I dismissed] anything that interfered with my raising my children by myself without having any help. It was kids first.

As a result, many single parents depend on a variety of supports and services when adding college to their already busy lives. These are not the traditional students most educators and decision-makers envisioned when creating their institutions and policies, and in this pre-intervention stage, students are particularly vulnerable to the constraints that come with single parenthood or coming from a single parent home.

Stage 1d: Pre-Intervention: Cyclical Failures—Self-Validation

Participants' responses also provided a lens to their levels of self-validation. During their pre-intervention phases, the participants' accounts illustrated that a great deal of cognitive dissonance was at work, showing them the disparity between where life could be and where they were.

Epiphanies. Most every interviewee described some experience that had acted as the proverbial light bulb that illuminated the path towards seeking change. This sub-theme looks at these pivotal points. Sharon described the need to complete something she left long ago. "I had to finish something that I started. Once I start something and if I'm interested in it, if I like it I'm going to finish it." As mentioned, Marissa, after traveling with a carnival for over 20 years, said, "I decided it's time to go home. And that's when I actually wanted to start looking into getting my GED." Michael attributed many pivots to his choice to change, including dissatisfaction with his current state:

> My life wasn't going that far. I was having kids couldn't get a job. I was just really struggling. I know that I see my life better than what it was. I got tired of just sitting around and . . . playing video games… [it] had me in a whole different world to where I was just . . . my life was just wasting away.

Another substantial catalyst was the influence family had on Michael: " I decided to get my life together when my mom decided to get herself clean and she came home and she made sure that she stayed clean and helped us, you know just get our life back together." This was true for Aloha as well: "I hope[d] to get a sense of mind and a better head on my shoulders. I can teach my children, you know, as far as I'm good with school so I can help them learn."

Marteen was motivated by dispelling beliefs others had of her. "I feel like this is my step right now because they told me I was uneducated. They told me I was too young, and they told me I couldn't do it. I think I should just prove it by [trying]." Jack was just tired: "I decided it was time for me to go and get a better life, instead of sitting around doing nothing. I was in my late 20s and I figured it was time to go and let that fear go." Tia looked at her list of things to accomplish and saw one needed checking off: "I said 'Getting my GED was on the top of my list.' I did not want to leave this earth without obtaining my GED."

Jennifer just decided to try one day. She actually felt she did not need one, but was persuaded by her significant other.

> I just saw a commercial one day on TV, and I said 'I'm going to see if I can do this' and then my boyfriend, he was like 'you know you should go to school because you are pretty smart and you can do something besides be a bill collector.' I'm like 'No!' because I used to fight with him all the time about going to school because he would tell me 'You know you need to go to school.' I said 'no I don't, because I got a job… where I make enough money where I don't need to go to school' . . . he was like 'Yes, you do. You know you should like go to school and see; you never know what you might be so. between arguing with him, and the commercial I just called and that was it.

Charles's epiphany began the moment he realized he would have to start over. Having already graduated high school with a special education diploma, he had charted the course of action needed.

> I was just looking for an overall guarantee and success and surely enough I was seeing [it]. [I would] basically gain my GED and my associate's [at] the same time; so I just figured [out] to myself right there and then [that] I wanted to pursue that particular route so I can just get it out the way at once, rather than going through this methodical and an uncertain path.

Seeking change. A clear relationship exists between the change process a student undergoes from pre-cyclical patterns to re-entry into institutions of higher education, and in the early intermediate phases of re-entry, this relationship is pivotal in deciding whether a student will succeed or slip between the cracks. The role of change agent, then, is strategically important for non-traditional students, particularly for adult learners; it is also critical for educators taking part in the complex process of understanding the relationship between learning and change and, overall, more purposefully assist with change as students face pressures and obstacles. However, change cannot be complete unless it involves action. Taking action related to a new mental concept or to organizational shifts commonly increases the flow of information surrounding that change and allows those involved to test out their actions, receive reactions, and involve others

in learning about it; this process is captured in this section where student narratives account for the process of seeking out change and finding comfort in the role of "becoming." Students often were faced with the challenge of not just trying but trying again and again, and with experiences ranging from not just one program, but many, the trials and tribulations were anything but trivial. Coupled with a decision to obtain a GED, a path toward starting was forged. The narratives of the study's participants provided a window for understanding this process; participants shared their experiences related to the change agents that infused a new sense of conceptualizing their educational experiences. For instance, Marissa was very proactive in her search:

> I was looking at the little adult education books at the library and I found and started at [a vocational school]. [But] It was conflicting with my workfare schedule. Maybe I should think about going to evening classes. I looked again on the back part of a book I seen Kenmore & Kokin College Pathways Program. Made a call to talk with Ms. B [the researcher]. Enrolled in evening program.

Charles had decided early.

> Once my immigration [was finalized], I could have a permanent residency and all of that . . . That's when I started my GED program. I needed a different approach so I engaged in research. I asked around and surely enough I came across an ad . . . [for] Kenmore & Kokin College pathways program.

Some students weren't as successful on the first try. Mariah said, "I went to the EOC Center and tried my GED classes there. They just [did not] work. I couldn't grasp it." Marteen discloses "[I] went to EOC. I tried BOCES and a lot of other GED program." Similarly, Jack tried a form of distance learning: "I would go **. . .** instead of sitting in the classroom, I take the homework home and I'd go see the teacher every two weeks. That wasn't really doing nothing for me because it seem like I wasn't getting any closer to taking the GED." Mike Delta further typifies this pattern; he just wanted to achieve like those around him: "I'm not one [from one]of

'dem families [where] I want to be the first to go to . . . Everybody in family has been to college so I wanted to go to college, but I knew I didn't have high school diploma."

In summary, the participants' lives are colored by a variety of experiences that have influenced, impacted, or halted their educational pursuit of a high school equivalency diploma once a traditional diploma was deemed unattainable. Some influences encouraged them despite of failure. Some impacted, whether positively or negatively, the way participants' viewed themselves scholastically and personally. The failures lived by the interviewees somehow became catalysts and agents for changing their lives. Each contributor's journey during that change, however, must be further examined for emergent themes relating to their re-entry into the educational pipeline of academia.

Stage 2: Re-entry Into the Educational Pipeline

This next section will survey the lived experiences of the interviewees as they progressed and completed the Pathways, PCA, and Achieve intervention programs at Kenmore & Kokin College (see Table 4.2 for an overview of Stage 2).

Table 4.2

Psycho-Social Stages/Themes Stage 2

Re-Entry Into the Educational Pipeline			
Personal Life Experiences	**Support Systems**	**Self-Identity**	**Self-Validation**
Challenges	Influential Relationships	Adult Learner	Falling Forward
Death and Dying	Faculty/Staff Support	Achiever	Maturation
Mental and Physical Health	Spirituality		Prove "Them" Wrong

Students were notably in a transition phase during this time. Many were getting used to the feeling and culture of a living campus while still struggling to find their place. While such

internal struggle persisted, personal life experiences additionally took hold and shook the foundation of their ambitions, nearly enough to cause them to fall into old patterns. The same major themes—personal life experiences, support systems, self-identity, and self-validation—proved present but with markedly different sub-themes, consisting of challenges, death and dying, mental and physical health, influential relationships, faculty and staff support, spirituality, aspects of being an adult learner, achiever re-labeling, persistence and failing forward, maturation, and the motivation to prove others wrong. These sub-themes are addressed in the following section and become telling in that they map the liminal spaces that exist in educational environments where non-traditional students and adult learners are striving to complete their higher education.

Stage 2a: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline—Personal Life Experiences

With the new experience of school, many of the participants expressed having to find equilibrium between school and personal life. The stories of the participants as they relate to their personal life experiences mark key turning points in their decision-making process, laying a blueprint for their pathways to success and their passages of hardship as they moved toward completion. Reviewed below are personal life experiences as detailed in the line of unique challenges, mental and physical health and death and dying.

Challenges. There are a number of challenges non-traditional students face when they decide to advance their education. There are issues of confidence, difficulties with technology, and, for many non-traditional students, they are the first ones in their immediate families to attempt higher education. Further, financial challenges persist, and these challenges are not limited to having sufficient funds to pay for the cost of tuition and books; they often extend to practical questions: How will I have money to get back and forth to school? How will I find the

money to eat lunch? In this study, these financial challenges are further exacerbated due to the economic instability in the personal lives of many students who are living in situations less than conducive for achieving academic success, mostly due to no, or minimal, income and/or financial support from parents and family.

More troubling, though, is that these statements are loaded with overlap, relating to environment, familial influence, and income, all coordinating factors that have the potential to inhibit a student's ability to succeed. Fixing one problem will not act as a silver bullet. There are more often than not a myriad of factors working together. Some students reside in neighborhoods with high crime rates, which impedes the student's need for structure to facilitate academic success. Although the student holds a strong desire to forge ahead, the student is still left with the question of "How?" Students at Kenmore & Kokin College faced many challenges that were described in moving detail. Michael, who was one of a few full time students who simultaneously held a full time job, had this to say about that experience:

> I was working my job, when I working at Tops, almost ten-hour shifts a day, you know and it was all guards. It was hard 10 hours, then like I was going to school classes in the afternoon my whole day was gone, like for four semesters. My mom watched my children, if they wasn't in daycare; they were off-and on in daycare.

In Michael's opening account, he reports long hours of work, coupled with classes that consumed entire days at a time; at the same time he is also faced with the responsibilities of being a father figure to his children. With such a schedule, one cannot simply force himself through each task, for to give each element its proper treatment, some standard prioritizing must take effect. Michael's situation requires a highly strategized balancing act to save face at his place of employment, complete his school work, and be there for his children in a healthy

capacity. However, in analyzing these narratives, Michael's situation was far from the most densely packed with activity or unfortunate in terms of circumstances.

As described in Maslow (1943), shelter is considered a safety need; however, Marteen's account describes her lack of shelter for most of her time at the college: "I was homeless most of the time. I was there so it was really challenging . . . sleeping at a friend's house, going from house to house and going to soup kitchens. Drinking Pepsi for a day. It is really hard." The absence of a stable living arrangement has a devastating impact on educational outcomes. Marteen was balancing a life of homelessness with going to school that led to spending entire days where the only thing she consumed was a soft drink. But, hunger is just one of the issues. For many students who are homeless not having the proper medical records, immunization records, previous school transcripts, or proof of residency are difficult problems that emerge from taking haven in unstable environments. Stigmas about homelessness combined with lack of support can often keep homeless students from receiving the best education possible, and educators who are unaware that a student is homeless may be insensitive to the circumstances. The cocktail created by the factors that infuse such a volatile situation often lead students to becoming frustrated and anxious, and when coursework becomes challenging, they are responding not just to the task being asked of them but to their overall circumstances as they pile up.

Some may find it difficult to imagine the kind of commitment and determination it takes to complete one's education while balancing such devastating circumstances and living in substandard or difficult conditions. Yet, when one combines such settings with irreversible harm and irreparable loss, situations become even more dire. When this harsh, unfriendly world produces the realities of experiencing the human-life circle of beginning and end, life and death,

the results can be demoralizing, life-shattering, and overwhelming, moving a student who was previously on track, from a path of success to failure and disregard, and all in the crushing instant one receives something as simple as a phone call. Too often deaths in urban communities are identified as the norm rather than the expectation.

Death and dying. Even though losing a loved one or being away from a seriously ill parent is common for college students, many can feel isolated when balancing school and family issues. Many students are not comfortable talking with their peers about grief or family illness because they don't want it to define them, and, as a result, these students are often balancing stress and sadness on their own. Some students dealt with the loss of loved ones during their time at Kenmore & Kokin College. Sharon explains how she dealt with the tragic loss of two family members:

> In August, that's when my niece and my cousin got killed at the City Grill…Tiffany passed away right in front of the City Grill. My niece was fighting in ambulance. They brought her back a couple of times, and when they put her on the operating table she died. She died in 2010 . . . I think I came to school maybe two days later and that's when I told you [the researcher] about it. But I kept coming to school. I didn't stop, I just kept coming because I needed something to occupy my time. I don't think I took . . . I didn't take off. I just kept coming . . . because if I would have just sat there and kept thinking about it, you know, that would of made me be depressed, and quit school, and that's what I didn't want to do. I wanted to show my kids regardless what happened in life, you going to have your ups and downs but you keep going. So I got through that. That was in August 2010.

Marissa dealt with the loss of her mother during her last college semester.

> The second to last semester we found out that my mom had cancer. They took her to the hospital they ran all the tests and everything and they found a lump on her head right by her temple. So in the second to the last semester was . . . very hard to get through, very hard.

Students dealing with grief often struggle academically, particularly during the semester of their loss. Whether it's a family death or serious illness, students may have to cope with

stresses such as feeling guilty for being away from home or struggling with financial issues connected to a family illness. In urban environments and on urban campuses, the impact becomes additionally troubling when the event is coupled with other circumstances that compromise one's ability to process a loss. Many people have heard of the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—and it used to be thought that once someone would go through these stages, the process of grief would end. Instead, it is now widely accepted that grief is not a process to get over, but rather a unique journey with a mixture of emotions and reactions. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, but there are some healthy and unhealthy coping strategies. For students not only dealing with death but also with a host of other difficulties in their lives, there can be additional impact on mental and/or physical health.

Mental and physical health. Some participants also dealt with health issues. The ability to cope with these occurrences and stay focused was discussed by a few participants. Sharon faced many health issues, almost simultaneously, but persevered:

> I still continued there were so many obstacles I even got sick. I got sick and I found out I had diabetes and I had high blood pressure… then January, come to find out I had to have surgery. I had to have hysterectomy, so that's the only time I missed school. I was off for a week and they wanted me to be off two weeks, and I had to come back to school I just didn't carry no books I had them in my locker.

Sharon's health problems caused a rift in her ability to complete her work for at least a week, but at the doctor's recommendation of two weeks of rest, she was resilient enough to push forward in less time. Though she was at school, Sharon noted, that although she attended class, she still had to go without course material for the following week, presenting a significant gap in how she digested the information as it was presented in her classes. Similarly, Mariah's adjustment to the Achieve Program (where she actually entered college) took a toll on her health:

> In my first semester I had a nervous breakdown, but it was it was a learning process. I learned more about myself, I learned more about education, I really learn more so much about myself than I ever did in college because I learned that I can put the pressure on myself but learn how to manage the pressure on myself. I . . . I never really knew how to manage my time well. I'm slightly a bad procrastinator, I really am. I'll wait to the last minute to do everything. I'll just like, "Okay, I have a 10 page paper due, wait to the week that is due and try to do 10 page paper," and is not going to work. So when I had my breakdown, I completely started having seizures for a whole week because I took on too much stress and for me stress is not a very good thing to have. I need to be calm at all times.

In Mariah's case, we find a problem that is life-altering and health-oriented but which is hidden from plain sight. Students whose absences are due to mental or physical health problems or to substance abuse, commonly go unnoticed. As stated, invisibility plays a role, but in addition, too, so does access. Some students don't know where to find campus resources for counseling or help or feel embarrassed to talk to advisors, counselors, mentors, or instructors. While students know that these resources exist, they can have misperceptions about what these services provide or who can use these services; it may be glaringly obvious that a student ought to take advantage of a particular service of a trained professional but may not occur naturally to an instructor or an advisor untrained to recognize symptoms. Doubly, it may never have crossed the student's mind that she or he may not be well. This is why it is essential that students have the proper support systems to provide backing, funding, care, and sustenance.

Stage 2b: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline—Support Systems

In the words of Maya Angelou (1994), "People may not remember exactly what you did, or what you said, but they will always remember how you made them feel." It only takes a couple of supportive faculty and staff, a committed partner, a concerned family member, or even a close friend to make a difference in a student's experience. For support systems, in this section of re-entry, it will be necessary to revisit students' influential relationships, faculty/staff support,

and their spiritual connection to a deeper, more profound purpose to their education. The tone of the participants became very positive when discussing those who supported them throughout their time at Kenmore & Kokin College.

Influential relationships. One particular group of students entered the Pre-College Academy program at its inception. They grew to be a tight cohort. Their individual accounts addressed their fellow cohort members as a support structure. Sharon stated, "There were a little group of us when we first started—Me, Jennifer, **** and Sophia. We was the oldest ones in the class…we all stuck together." She went on to add that "We all used to help each other. We all passed [the college entrance exam]. Four: me, *****, Sophia, and Jennifer. Three of us [Sharon, Sophia, & Jennifer] graduated out of the four." In similar fashion, and in addition to the support structure that Sharon mentioned, Jennifer's relationship with her aunt helped aid her throughout school. She notes that her aunt has been "a college professor at . . . for over 35 years. She was an English professor who would go over my papers and check for spelling errors." Likewise, as we see a pattern developing, the support Mariah received from her mother was paramount to her ultimate success:

> Throughout this whole process of me going to school . . . she brought me to school when I had my surgery so I could come in and be signed in to comply with the attendance policy. And in a wheelchair and neck brace and everything she assure[d] me that I was going to get my education. Without my mother I wouldn't have be here. I wouldn't be the person that I am.

Another student who felt a strong familial connection was Tia; she felt her father's approval for her attending a school that he once matriculated from: "I know my dad was . . . he was very proud because he had attended [Kenmore and Kokin] College at one time. He was definitely [supportive of] my educational goals." Further, Mike Delta shared how his father's death was a contributing factor toward his focus when entering college:

> Yeah ah well when I went into it, it was like first day of pre-k, first day of kindergarten, first day of high school. It was the exact same, but I really felt like, 'ah dog, I don't know what I'mma do.' This seems terrible I can't. This seems so hard, but it wasn't, and like slacking off is not something I can do, because my dad passed away when I was nine 'bout to turn ten. He had cancer, so I can't disappoint him. He had so much before he was 25. My father was in the Air Force. My father was getting his Masters to become a doctor. He was doing a whole bunch before like way after way before how old I am now. I just don't wanna; I just feel everything I do wrong would let him down, and I feel I haven't let him down yet.

When students are confused, down, or just need support, sometimes it is the relationships they build in and outside of academia that more definitively embed them in the fabric of the college. Sometimes all a student needs is encouragement from peers, such as Sharon's brief mention of a close cohort of students who looked out for one another or Jennifer's situation where she mentions a helping hand from her aunt. Together, upon re-entry into the college, there is a necessary undertaking of personal responsibility, but particular influential relationships can sometimes be the deciding factor that shows a student with previous negative educational history that this time can be different.

Faculty/staff support. Many colleges and universities have struggled to adapt to this changing student marketplace, often finding themselves burdened by traditions and practices that prove ill-suited for non-traditional learners. The participants in this study were asked how they felt the faculty and staff helped them during their time at Kenmore & Kokin College. Most recalled extremely positive experiences. Adult students have unique needs, especially if they are employed. For instance, Sharon explained, "If you get a relationship with the staff, like I said it's even wonderful. You sit and talk to one of the teachers . . . I'm not saying they're all bad, but they are excellent. If you . . . need[ed] help, they [would] help you, if you had a problem." Like Sharon, Jennifer recalled some of the characteristics of her instructors: "Dr. Welch, makes you feel good. Ms. K, she was my pre-college English teacher. It's like you know they just sort of

encouraging. They make me feel like somebody." Jennifer also mentioned her advisor: "Mrs. Benton [the researcher]: If she felt I needed feedback, she would give me feedback. If she felt I didn't, she would let me vent. 'Do you feel better? Ok you can go to class now.'"

Marissa's account was also favorable. She stated, "[Mary Pulstulka: Pathways Instructor] She is the sweetest, sweetest woman. You can actually learn at your own pace . . . I think Ms. Benton actually helped a lot with just encouraging me." When recalling a time where she did not pass the placement exam for PCA, Marissa had this to say:

> Mrs. Benton came to the rescue: 'Don't worry about it . . . we'll try again, and the second time . . . That's what I love [about the college], because all of the instructors, the whole staff is like very down-to-earth. I mean they talk to you like you're people and not just a paycheck, or money in the bank, you know. You can actually sit there and have a conversation with any given person at Kenmore & Kokin [just] because.

Charles felt that he gained great insight from his instructors and staff:

> I had instructors that actually pointed out where I was slipping up and where my strengths were. I was also gaining new insight on how college life was like in terms of how you do the work, how meeting expectations from the college level. Interacting with teachers and basically building up my interpersonal skills that one needs to navigate through college and life itself.

Mariah described her view of the advisement center at Kenmore & Kokin College:

> I think advisement is critical when it comes to students and just having that one-to-one relationship having open communication with them. [Mrs. Benton would say] 'Well, you meet me after class, or you can come in another day and I'll help you with whatever you need help with.'

However, there was one instructor who was mentioned in all of the student accounts as being extremely influential and integral in their GED and college experience. Sharon stated her "favorite one was Dr. Campbell . . . That was my favorite teacher. You want me to be honest on camera? Oh, he was so sexy and country (laughs). Yes, but he also listen(s) to you if you had a problem. Dr. Campbell will break it down. He will listen to you." Perhaps less provocative was

Jennifer's recollection: "Dr. Campbell always had a smile on his face, made you feel good." Marissa described him as "helpful and "wonderful." Charles believed Dr. Campbell's teaching aided him in his presentation style as well as the mechanics of essay writing: "I did, however, a good job of improvising and trying to impose my general idea of what the concepts were, thanks to Dr. Campbell, my English teacher. I believe his teachings." Jack said English with Dr. Campbell was his favorite subject. In describing one of his lessons he said, "He had us . . . watch videos of . . . different songs that compared . . . two different songs about the same topic. I compared the 'Ex- factor' by Lauryn Hill, and the Beatles song, 'Everybody Needs Love.' He pretty much said they compared to each other because they were both describing Love and that someone needed to be loved."

Moreover, though, Michael expressed some of the most moving vignettes regarding his time with Dr. Campbell. Michael describes somewhat of a mentor/mentee relationship with his English instructor. Indeed he felt the instructor possessed "swag" (short for swagger, which means confident, self-assured, with street credibility):

> Dr. Campbell: I felt his vibe you know like me, from the streets, you know and he had like the big brother like attitude . . . like from somebody that I know from the street. He just broke it down to me and in my way of learning, this is somebody who cared. He kept me motivated. 'Man, you can do it.' You know that was really just for me . . . He taught me everything . . . how to build an essay from the ground up.

At one point Michael was actually terminated from the college. He described how Dr. Campbell stepped to his aid:

> I was on the dismissal list. I was like okay, I'll go drop the books off . . . I went to go get my classwork [from] Dr. Campbell's class . . . that's what [I] think about every time . . . I get ready to quit: The expression on his face. Yeah, he just jumped up and looked at me like, 'What you doing? Where you come from?' I said, 'I just came to get my work . . . I'm past the 17days, you know I can't come [to school anymore].' He said, 'What, no!' He stopped his whole class and told them . . . he'll be back with them. [He] just to . . . [took] me to the [Dean of Instruction's] office . . . to get me back in the school

> ‘cause he wasn’t ‘gon let me quit, ‘cause he said, ‘I know you can do it.’ He said, ‘Man, I know,’ . . . He was telling me, ‘I know it’s rough, it seems rough but you can’t give up.’

After Dr. Campbell showed Michael all of his above average (mostly A) papers, Michael “broke down in the office, you know. I was crying. I just felt like . . . it felt good to really have somebody that believed in me, yeah. And just, it was like, I can do this.”

Spirituality. As the challenges grew, some students again described their relationships with God and spiritual practices as positive. Sharon said, “I prayed and prayed; that’s my method. It was God who got me through this.” She goes on to emphasize, “[God], you got to get me through the day, you got to get me through this class, you got to get me through this exam, you got to get me through this midterm. Just believe in yourself . . . pray and believe, and you can do anything.” Mariah also felt God was influential in securing her internship at her place of worship. She said, “I was able to, thank God, find an internship at my church with True Bethel. I [learned] different aspects of the church, the different securities systems of the church.” In addition, Tia shared her spirituality with other classmates: “Before we took the test we all went into the room and formed a circle, held hands, and prayed before we took that exam.”

The issue of spiritual values or the question of the meaning of life and self-responsibility are major issues in modern existence, particularly in connection with establishing values and the proper way to live one’s life, but furthermore, spirituality breeds hope and provides guidance in the face of difficult circumstances. Tia mentions how spirituality developed a community of peers together; Mariah felt a personal connection with her educational path and spiritual life. As reported in the stories of these participants, spirituality played an important role in establishing not only a sense of self as it was related to community but also a sense of personal identity. In fact most people described a number of important ways of thinking about themselves that are

significant enough to be considered multiple senses of self. Our sense of self include those roles, attributes, behaviors, and associations that we consider most important about ourselves and, more essentially, contribute to an intrinsic sense of motivation associated with the security, protection, and acceptance necessary for forming cohesive, healthy, and productive self-identities.

Stage 2c: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline—Self-Identity

Adult learner. Among re-entry into the educational pipeline, one of the most frustrating and trying times for students is finding themselves and their place in campus and academic culture. At times, it's not only the students who need to adjust, but as feedback notes, it is also the institutions. Adult students especially have unique needs, particularly if they are employed. Among others, these needs include different kinds of information about their educational options, institutional flexibility in curricular and support services, academic and motivational advising supportive of their life and career goals, and recognition of experience and work-based learning already obtained. In this study, the role of the learner was viewed as quite polarizing as it is described in terms of both academic disappointment and triumph. Although not always successful at first, participants also described the time it "clicked." Jennifer said, "I felt uncomfortable because I'm an older student. I went into the Pre-college program which was a little more difficult." She explained her frustration but also its impact: "Three tries to pass the test, [and I] finally passed . . . Started College in 2011 got into college . . . Got my GED in March, graduated with an associate's degree in May 2013." Charles employed technology to boost his English/Grammar/Writing skills: "I utilized the internet to kind of pick up on small tidbits on how to do this English. I used YouTube video to help with my English. I was given an opportunity to actually utilize the mathematical tools I learned from the pre-college

academy." Mariah, however, needed a different kind of support; she knew that she needed not just access to technology but also to enlist more support, to build a team of people around her who understood her challenges and who were willing to help her to succeed. She describes what happened once she returned to the college after her time off:

> I received ADA special accommodations, [assignments read to me], and extra testing time made so that I wasn't stressed. My [stress] level was just very low; I was calm. I got a lot better grades so my test scores improved greatly. I had a hard time balancing when I was a full-time student . . . Thursdays worked for me so I became a part-time student. When I did my internship I had to find an internship that would allow me to give back, but also keep my stress level down so I wouldn't get sick and wouldn't trigger any seizers.

When Jack started the Pathways program as an adult learner, he still managed to score high enough to get into the Pre-College Academy. He shared his experience about that transition stating, "In the pre-college . . . in English, I was kinda nervous because it was different than the pathway English. It was more to it than I thought . . . to really understand anything, but Ms. K. made it seem interesting." He went on to add that he "wanted to learn it, so . . . And Mr. Davis, in the math was kinda awkward at times. Well, at times it's like it was, he would come up with the same execution it's just we went about it a totally different way." Jack's descriptions are telling in many ways, conveying how changes in content and different teaching styles can affect a student and sometimes present silent barriers to success. After dropping out of the Pathways program twice, Marteen described transitioning to the Pre-College academy and finally passing college level math and English:

> When I came back to try out for the GED program you . . . made me take a test. I was dizzy. I was hungry. I was thirsty. You bought me a pop. You gave me some chips. I sat down. I went to go take the English test first. I told you I wasn't gonna pass it. You was like 'Yes you will.' I was like 'No.'…When I came back, I told you 'I betcha I failed.' You was like 'No. Actually you passed with flying colors.' I was like 'Seriously?' You was like' 'Yeah' . . . I was excited to feel like a college student, and I entered into the college cause I passed both of them.

Achiever. Students normally identified as having problems in school either meeting eligibility criteria for educational services or being unofficially labeled by negative adjectives. These descriptions can be debilitating and harmful to student progress. In the past, students who are in the re-entry stage may have been labeled "lazy," "unmotivated," "a slow learner," or as a student with a "behavior problem." Once the participants became more confident, they identified themselves as achievers. Jennifer said, “It make[s] me feel good [to finish.] I was getting the hang of going to school; made me feel like I’m somebody.” Sharon said “…to get my GED, I was so happy.” Marissa said, “I was very proud, telling myself I did it.” Aloha’s first time on the Dean’s list brought her to tears:

> In the middle of my semester when I started seeing the grades and praises from you know I was doing a good job, so I think it helped build my self-esteem? I was in tears believe it’s I was so happy I just couldn’t believe it. I never thought I would have it, never. I had been in five different GED program since I was 21, 22 years old. My first time being on the Dean’s list was exciting.

Jack, after leaving the PreCollege Academy, described his experience this way:

> Then I passed my GED and entered college. It made me feel happy and somewhat exhausted. I was 32 years old when I received my GED. I called my dad on his birthday and told my dad happy birthday and I got my GED. He was happy my mom was happy also. It made me want to do better and made me realize that they were right, that I could do anything that I set my mind to. My grandfather congratulated me when he learned that I had received my GED. My sister told me anything thing I needed she would help me.

Other students also reported a positive correlation with self-labeling. Tia said, “I felt good when I learned that I had passed to get into the college and start working on my GED. This was my first successful experience with the educational system.” The power of re-labeling allows students to reframe their educational experience and chart new paths forward, an essential step in establishing a new educational identity. Notably, this is more than a simple persona for

these students to take pride in, more than just naming or labeling. In the educational journey that is re-entry into the educational pipeline, the next step is toward integrating students into the culture of the college and moving them closer to self-validation.

Stage 2d: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline—Self-Validation

In the re-entry stage, Self-validation takes on an important role if a student is to be successful. It is the process of recognizing and transcending the sense of one's educational self by various means to appreciate the value of their educational experience and their personal experience. In other words, self-validation is the process of restoring and reinforcing self-worth and personal identity through instilling a sense of competence. At times, this comes about through a variety of activities and interactions with one's natural and social environments, but in the college environment it can truly play an important role in determining success. As students, the participants consistently engaged in activities that provided opportunity and encouragement to keep moving toward their collective goal of completion. Many of their stories depicted this trend.

Failing forward. One of the objectives of the Pre-College Academy was to teach students how to persist, even after numerous failures. Sharon understood that "My point is . . . I went through so much trying to get my GED . . . and to get my Associate's degree and I've been through so so so so so so much. I never stopped. It was just the drive in me."

Marissa describes her persistence in testing for the PCA:

> The first time I took it by didn't get through it quite; I missed it by two points. I was kind of discouraged. Again, Ms. Benton came to the rescue; don't worry about it we will try again and the second time. [Second time]. "I got good news for you! You got on the list again, you're in the pre-college academy again!

Once she entered Achieve, Marissa faced another set of hurdles to overcome.

> My first semester was kind of like really nerve-racking because I was actually trying to get the feel for college like most college students do. There's always that nervous energy trying to be perfect. Making sure you are on time and I was always early. I mean it's nervous and trying to just make sure everything was in on time. I mean it's definitely the first semester really scary. But I got through it.

Charles made repeated attempts at the college entrance exam:

> Despite the fact that it did take me four . . . tries to get in. First time though it was like I pretty much easily passed the math and reading, but it was like my grammar kind of kept me down a little bit. The other two, I kind of had a bad run with the test, and then the third time I pretty much beat out my math score, and I placed a test by scoring a 90. And then basically, scoring well on all the other sections of the test, so surely enough I was placed in a pre-college English and College Math for my first semester.

Aloha made two attempts at the college entrance exam:

> My sister started me with this program [Pathways] . . . she was like, 'I think you can do it.' When they said college prep [PCA], I said 'I can't do it!' 'You can do it!' I took the entrance exam, I passed it, I passed everything else but the math by two points. They tutored me in that math for about two weeks. I came back and took the test and passed it. I just couldn't believe it. I never thought . . . I was so amazed. So I didn't know what I had in me!

Marteen had to make a major adjustment to technology once she became a college student:

> I didn't know what a computer was. I had to learn how to open one and use it and navigate it. It was so hard. They made you write papers I didn't know anything about writing. So I had to stay in the learning center and try to get extra help, but it all work out because my first semester I got a 3.9 GPA.

However, more telling, Mike Delta's account was not steeped in early failures. His motivation was that he did not want to wait a whole year to start college:

> I sat there and thought I'm like, 'that's too damn long.' I can't take that long. (Laughs) That's too long, so I went to the Pathways program. [They] told me about an exam I can take. [I thought] 'I'm like bout to score high so I don't have to go through all this forever.' So scored high on the exam, Got into college. Finished it. It's over (laughs). Yeah, I feel you posed to don't slack off. I'm a person that I used to like school, but I hate school so I didn't slack off so I can get it over with it (laughs).

Marteen's forward thinking even helped her select a better suited major that utilized her math skills. She had this to say about the Business program: "It was a nice program, but it wasn't for me. I knew that my math skills were sharper. I transferred to the Accounting

Program." In closing, Jack's statement summarizes many of the other participants' sentiments. He reported, "It made me want to do better and made me realize that they were right, that I could do anything that I set my mind to."

Maturation. Many people use the words growth and maturation interchangeably. Growth is the physical process of development, particularly the process of becoming physically larger. It is quantifiable, meaning that it can be measured, and it is mostly influenced by genetics. On the other hand, maturation is the physical, intellectual, or emotional process of development. Maturation is often not quantifiable and is determined not entirely by one's genetic make-up but by numerous experiences that provide templates for behavior. Many of the participants' experiences evidenced self-validation, and, discernibly, their self-validation stemmed from a natural maturing: as students, adults, and citizens they began to absorb and understand the requirements of higher learning. Jennifer provided her synopsis of the needs of older adult students versus younger adult students:

> We are older that we need a little more encouragement. We need a little more understanding and a little bit more. Other things that we have deal with like family, kids, and grandkids. We just need a little bit more understanding because they younger kids don't understand they don't have to deal with all those issues to deal and it much easier for them to focus and stay on course. We just need a little more understanding not to be thrown by the wayside.

Marissa recognized her growth as a student: "The first semester it kind of like that I was feeling things out. By the time I got to the second and the last semester I was already in the flow of things and I knew where to go, how to go and what to ask, where to go you know certain people." Likewise, Charles spoke of the responsibilities of being a full time student: "I would say taking 15 to 18 hours of courses was pretty intense it was like I had to stay on my toes constantly and making sure that for once, the assignment [was] done and turned in on time."

Jack was adamant about getting over his apprehensions: "I just said, I pretty much said I don't care if I get scared or not, I'm going to do it." Michael, who was in last semester of coursework toward his associate's, can finally breathe: "Now that I am in my last semester it's easy to balance it out doing just the two classes."

Marteen's responses exhibited hints of maturation and overall change for the better:

> I maintained a 3.5 GPA every semester until I graduated, [and] I've been on the Dean's List ever since I entered college. I would say that I'm eating healthier. [I am] trying to quit smoking because I know it's not good and trying to stay away from bad influences and bad crowds. I don't know why I want to change; however, I'm different.

Prove "them" wrong. Self-validation does not stop at restoring the damaged self-esteem and meaning of life in crisis situations. It is an on-going process throughout life. We are continually maintaining and enhancing self-validation as part of our life-long learning lifestyle. We deliver proper care to maintain the self-validating lifestyle in working order to instill happiness and meaning in life and cope with stressful and self-invalidating situations. For this to take place, education cannot take the form of something that only happens in classrooms. It must be something integrated into one's lifestyle. Therefore, we treasure nurturing relationships, seek and try to perfect personal activities and talents, and attempt to create a familiar and pleasant environment. Many of the subjects articulated a need to achieve, not only for their own validation but also for their naysayers who said they could not change. Marissa stated, "I was proud of myself because I did achieve it, and because most of my life I was actually told that I was not ever going to amount to anything." When she talked about outside reactions to her success, Marissa said, "They were like 'Wow! I guess you are going to be somebody!' I said, 'I told you all along, I was somebody! And yes I am going to amount to something."

Mariah's resilience stemmed from overcoming her obstacles, despite others' opinions.

> I didn't like being labeled. 'Oh there's a child that has dyslexia; there's a girls who wears a lift on her shoe; there is a girl who has the scars on her legs from the 26 surgeries or who walks with a limp.' I've learned that it's okay to be different; it's ok to not fit in the box, and even though I don't fit in, I'm amazing because I don't fit in.

Marteen pushed past pressure to stay the course: "Your old friends come by and try to pressure you into doing things but it takes a strong person to say no. You know people get mad at me when I say 'No.'" The will to stand up and be responsible and consistent in the face of criticism and adversity became a defining trait. Sharon also faced criticism, but met it with strong tenacity:

> [What does it cost] for somebody to believe in me? It don't cost nothing, but is so hard for people to do it. Because a lot of people didn't believe I was going to graduate. I had to let them know I'm not no quitter. 'Oh, y'all think I ain't gone do it? Let me show y'all what I could.' And I did it. Even, like I said, I used to come in here and couldn't see nothing but I listen. If you can listen too you can learn by listening. You ain't always got to be on the computer, because I couldn't see nothing, anyway. Because of my vision, my sugar was so high, my vision was blurry, I could see nothing anyway. But I listened, I showed up to class. I didn't give up.

Stage 3: Post-Intervention, Culture of Completion

Stage 1: Pre-Intervention, Cyclical Failures considered participants' reflections leading up to their enrollment into the intervening success models. Participants spoke about forces and influences prior to intervention. The next section, Stage 2: Re-entry into The Educational Pipeline, surveyed the lived experiences of the interviewees as they progressed and completed the Pathways, PCA, and Achieve intervention programs at Kenmore & Kokin College. Students were notably in a transition phase during this time, and many of them were getting used to the feeling and culture of a living campus, while still struggling to find their place. During this stage, personal life experiences additionally took hold and shook the foundation of their ambitions, nearly enough to fall into old patterns. In Stage 3: Post-Intervention, Culture of Completion, participants now reported the echoes of their educational experience upon

completion of the programs described in this study and others even upon receiving their degrees (see Table 4.3). Thematic elements remain consistent with the previous two sections; however, the various sub-themes explore how students turned previous experiences into fuel for positive change agents in Setbacks for Comebacks, Death and Dying, Influential Relationships, Faculty/Staff Support, Spirituality, Familial Support, Failure and Fear, Achiever/Role Model, Maturation, Epiphanies, and Seeking New Challenges.

Table 4.3

Psycho-Social Stages/Themes Stage 3

Post-Intervention, Culture of Completion			
Personal Life Experiences	**Support Systems**	**Self-Identity**	**Self-Validation**
Setbacks for Comebacks	Influential Relationships	Failure and Fear	Maturation
Death and Dying	Faculty/Staff Support	Achiever/Role Model	Epiphanies
	Spirituality		Seeking New Challenge

Stage 3a: Post-Intervention, Culture of Completion—Personal Life Experiences:

In this section, participants talked about their personal life experiences post-intervention. These narratives contain the transition from learning to real-world application after completion. Stage 3a is broken into two halves: Setbacks for Comebacks and Death and Dying. These sub-themes proved to be the two most recurring motifs in Stage 3: Post-Intervention when considering participants' personal life experiences in relation to post intervention status.

Setbacks for comebacks. As detailed in Stage 1 and Stage 2, numerous pre-cyclical patterns persist in the habits of mind of non-traditional students before their induction and re-entry into higher education. Once properly orientated and ushered into the college environment, students are faced with unfamiliar surroundings and an even more unfamiliar culture. First, being non-traditional, they are faced with the task of learning the hidden rules of

school and finding their place among their peers. During this time, many personal experiences, positive and negative, have an impact and either spur on or stagger their progression as students. Post-Intervention, participants shared how these educational experiences have impacted their lives. Many students reported using previous negative experiences as motivators and agents of change.

Charles, who began as a special education student, specifically expressed his prior frustration with "even getting out of high school." He further noted, "being labeled a special education student does have its own unique challenges as well." Though Charles was the only participant who technically graduated high school with a special education diploma, it is notable that he felt as if he "had no degree [diploma]" and that "It [would be] nearly impossible . . . to even attend college." These initial setbacks led Charles to different ways of trying to accomplish his goal. When he finally got his GED, he said, "Mom was ecstatic," and reiterated what it took to "make a bad situation good." What can be observed in Charles's experience is a shift in how he viewed himself and the role education played in his life. After completing his associate's degree, Charles noted that he was interested in "learning a second language" and even "learning sign language." It was as if the initial pathways for positive change in his life had been illuminated and he saw a clear picture of where he would like to go. Charles went on to study at The Rochester Institute for Technology (RIT), a private university that offers career-oriented education. He spoke candidly during his interview about "using skills he learned from English," and in a most eloquent portrayal, expressed an awareness of financial literacy, understanding what the various programs at Kenmore & Kokin College had done to allow him to pursue his education without the package of student loan debt that his other classmates recklessly shrugged off and for which, later, would impact even his future endeavors as a student.

But, Charles was not the only student to advance into a bachelor's program after completion. Tia, too, consistently growing as a student during her time at Kenmore & Kokin College, was later accepted to the State University of New York. Tia's interview outlined a number of reasons why she didn't finish high school, but she mentioned more than once the importance of having someone there to "push you" and be your "support system." Looking back at her experience, she stated that she no longer feels the same about not graduating from high school, because "I've accomplished so much since then," and at one point, she almost directly addressed the camera when she said, "Just don't give up and don't give in." Tia talks about her father's willingness to compliment her hard work. She reiterates that her father "could not stop talking about it," referring to her success as a student. "That's just how proud he was of me, you know," she said. "It made me feel so good."

Although Tia's experience is filled with many positives, her time at the state college was not without adversity. After completion of the requirements she needed at Kenmore & Kokin College and moving on to the state college, she found that "it's different because it's a state University . . . It's a different world." She discusses the challenges of being in an educational environment with "a lot more students," where the facilities and the community are "bigger." Tia mentions that attending a school like . . . was "a lot to get used to," and outside forces and changes in her familial support system made for tough time. She eventually returned to Kenmore & Kokin College but this time to enter the program for court stenography located at the Amherst campus. During the recording of the interview, she was on track to graduate in May of 2015.

Tia's time at the state college may have been marred by outside disruptions typical of a non-traditional student's journey, and though she didn't graduate from the state college, notably,

she didn't quit. She found a way to continue her education. Not all students bounce back the same way, and not all students in this study completed their desired programs without setback. Jennifer similarly had issues toward the completion of her bachelor's degree and was forced to re-take the final class in her program to satisfy the requirements needed to graduate. Jennifer is currently re-taking the course but was allowed to walk at the 2015 commencement ceremonies for graduation at Kenmore & Kokin College. In Charles's interview, more definitively, he is indicating the nuance of how he moved from an outsider to an insider in the community and culture of higher learning. He speaks of the tools he needed to accomplish his goals and the resources that were and still are available. He spent time at RIT, only to later realize that to continue his education, he'll need to plot out a smart and efficient financial plan and execute that plan carefully. As mentioned throughout this section, many students in this study faced setbacks in their personal life experience, but facing those setbacks during the intervention stage gave these students the heart and endurance to press on. They learned to turn setbacks into comebacks.

Death and dying. Though death is a part of life, the true-life experience of losing someone, whether a close or distant relationship, is an extremely personal event. Acknowledging that everyone grieves differently as we are all uniquely created and journey through life on our own distinct paths, it becomes apparent that there are many factors contributing to how individuals cope with death, specifically, when the loss is part of one's own support system. Death of a spouse or family member, significant other or friend, role model, neighbor, colleague or coworker, or whatever the relationship, the physical permanent absence of a person in another person's life brings to light issues that a vast majority of peoples' experiences during adulthood

can corroborate. There are natural patterns and stages one experiences when dealing with loss. Death and dying as a life-altering event, without question, reaches non-traditional students—continuing to add to their own adversity— and further tests their coping abilities and resilience.

When death involves the loss of a pregnancy or an unborn child, the grief stricken feelings that may occur encompass shock, anger, failure, and/or depression—all of which can become setbacks. This was experienced by Sophia as she most delicately disclosed during her narrative/interview. Seemingly, miscarrying—in addition to providing and caring for several young children as a single mother—and dealing with her unrelenting self-involved life choices, Sophia incurred added struggles and stressors that affected her academic progress while attempting to complete her personal objective of successfully continuing her education. Because she did not have a counselor who works at Kenmore & Kokin College, I would work with Sophia to help her resolve the hurt, pain, and loss associated with the event, which Sophia not only endured but, for a short time, also temporarily disabled her. In the shadow of looming loss and depression, however, she still persevered to complete her academic tasks.

Stories of great resiliency, such as is described in the case of Sophia, are nothing short of inspirational; yet, she was not the only student who fought through the tragedy and hardship of death and dying. Both Tia and Marissa completed their academic programs under life-altering circumstances as well. Their losses were similar—yet, different. Marissa experienced the death of her mother as she entered the final period of her academic pursuit. She acknowledged, "the second to the last semester was . . . very hard to get through; very hard." Marissa further stated, "My mom passed away before graduation." Although she encountered a number of unfortunate personal challenges that greatly affected her physical health, the death of her mother during the

process of finishing her educational goal overwhelmed her. Her circle of support was diminishing; consequently, she had absolutely no control over her circumstances. With committed determination, in spite of the hand that life had dealt her, Marissa continued on to successfully complete her goal.

Tia also experienced the death of a loved one, but this time it came twice, in the form of both parents—her father and mother. She disclosed during the interview that in December 2012, shortly before her first semester ended, her father died. Tia desolately stated, "While I'm trying to still be on the path of trying to achieve, I'm still going through the reality of my dad's death." Tia revealed as we continued the interview that "August 2013, my mom died." Losing both parents, straightforwardly, adds a final period to the chapter in one's life where the people responsible for giving you life no longer experiences life themselves. Decidedly, Tia went on to complete her program and further pursue continuing education at the State University of New York College. The presence of her community had taken on a different appearance since her support system had now dramatically changed with the demise of both parents. Her circle of influence became her circle of concern since she had never experienced any loss of this magnitude. Once more, this is an example of the non-traditional student being faced with transformative circumstances that could potentially paralyze life progression. With exceptional willpower and discipline, in the case of Tia, the completion of her academic objectives were not only attainable, but in the end, satisfied.

The final example of how death and dying played a strategic role in these students' lives and in the outcomes of their educational journeys can be found in Mike Delta's interview. Mike said, "My dad is an awesome person. I love my dad. He is the best person in the world," while also speaking to his father's passing:

> My father was so great, that's one of the things with the pathways because you just assume I dropped out of high school like because my father was around they just assumed a regular black guy with a regular, as they say black father; I'm like 'no my father was in my life every single day.' He walked me to school every day. My father was the best person. He passed away from cancer.

We learn later in the interview that Mike lost a father figure and male role model in one person. He speaks about his memory in spiritual terms. Mike said, "That's the person I looked up to. I looked to him more than I looked up to anybody because like I love God and Jesus and everything but I don't. I looked up to my father more than that because he set an example like I have God in Jesus' words. I have my dad's image." Mike Delta, despite filling the vacancy and emptiness that comes with death and dying, turned his education into a kind of memorial, not just to acknowledge or come to terms with the loss itself but to become the man he thought his father wanted him to be.

Upon organizing data from these narratives, at the phase of academic completion, it is significant to note that those non-traditional students who suffered loss were not faced with the challenges that occur from death by violence and/or crime. While grieving is apparent—regardless of cause, the overwhelming experiences that surround death are inevitable. Unreservedly, no one can conceptualize or plan the behavior in which death will affect the everyday habits of one's life. Identifying death as an emergent theme of several of the students and its impact on their already, adversely restricted standard of life, resonates valiantly and conveys a stark sense of heart and fortitude at the center of their educational experience, speaking further to the importance of having a strong and stable support system.

Stage 3b: Post-Intervention: Culture of Completion—Support Systems:

Thus far, support systems have proven absolutely essential to student success. Whether it be the lack of support present in the early narratives of pre-cyclical failure or the coordination of

overlapping systems of support spoken about once students partook in re-entry into the educational pipeline, one thing is for certain: without exception, at least one of the following relationships played a critical role in the successes of participants:

- assistance and encouragement from faculty and staff,
- a greater sense of purpose or deeper spiritual meaning related to education, and
- a feeling of acceptance from friends and family.

Examining these sub-themes more closely post-intervention should shed light on how these relationships shaped the educational journey and instilled the habits necessary to build a culture of completion.

Influential relationships. Educators, parents, and students understand that problematic relationships can be detrimental to student outcomes and development. Productive learning environments are characterized by supportive and warm interactions throughout a student's educational experience; sometimes relationships take numerous forms, outside of the normalized teacher-student and student-student interactions we commonly associate with school settings. By looking back at the pre-cyclical failures present in the interviews of the non-traditional students in this study and coupling that information with the transition after re-entry or During Intervention stage, the researcher examined what role relationships played in retaining and engaging the participants in their educational process and integrating them into campus and academic culture. Many students began with scarred educational histories. They have histories of rejection and failure. They have histories of oppression and disrespect. Their stories reflect these histories, and because of these patterns, they have a natural distrust of the culture and structure of educational institutions and those who work for them. During re-entry the challenge is to create relationships that are antithetical to those past dealings that resulted in distrust. In

post-intervention, it is necessary to record how students have conceptualized their scholastic experience and the relationships that were pivotal to the completion of coursework and what that means going forward.

For Marissa, who consistently "put off" education for many years, it means carving out the time and space and finding reason enough to return during the pre-cyclical phase, leaving what she's known to enter an unfamiliar environment in the re-entry phase and capitalizing on the solid relationships she built during the post-intervention phase and culture of completion. Marissa addressed her willingness to reach out during her interview. She said, "I called my love, Ms. Carolyn Benton, and asked her if she could write a letter of recommendation and she said absolutely." This is Marissa being comfortable enough to inquire about the letter of recommendation but, additionally, using the resources and relationships available through the college—to use the opportunities her degree presents. Moreover, this is a learned behavior and product of integrating Marissa into the campus community; she now has a support system of fellow students, teachers, faculty, staff, advisors, and more who play a role when and if she is willing to access and ask for their assistance and/or advice.

Earlier in the study, Sharon mentioned a group of students who hung together and created close bonds during their time in school. She said, "There were a little group of us when we first started" and went further to say "we all stuck together." More than just the content of what Sharon may have learned in school, she doubly was learning something else: true learning doesn't happen in a vacuum and doesn't take place in isolation. Collectively, the group was socially constructing and building learning communities: "We all used to help each other. We all passed [the college entrance exam]." Details such as these convey how learning became group oriented, how influential relationships nurtured and gave shape to knowledge. In the culture of

completion, students like Sharon, and those she mentions, gathered and took with them ways of critically examining issues and working through them together.

In Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline, Sharon mentioned her relationship with Jennifer as one of the people who came together to produce a study group. Additionally, however, Jennifer, in her interview, mentions her aunt, who has been "a college professor at . . . for over 35 years" and would help "check for spelling errors." Indirectly, the pools of knowledge here are extended outward, overlapping and intersecting, and, now, campus connections blur the line between insider and outsider. The Culture of Completion, then, is marked by a willingness to see information as something open for dissemination, a cultural artifact passed on for individual and collective benefit. The melding of support among friends, family, tutors, instructors, and the like, emphasizes a new frame of influence that is multidirectional and insists that students become advocates of their own learning process, not because they must conquer problems alone but because learning is a communal act, and the relationships we build are the centerpiece of creating a life where we are continually growing and developing.

Faculty/staff support. Post-intervention, many students looked back at their experience at Kenmore & Kokin College with regard to the close interpersonal relationships made with faculty and staff. For instance, Sharon explained Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline that "If you get a relationship with the staff" it's "wonderful" and "You sit and talk to one of the teachers . . . if you had a problem." Like Sharon, Jennifer talked about faculty and staff giving her a sense of self-worth: "Dr. Welch makes you feel good. Ms. K, she was my pre-college English teacher. It's like you know they just sort of encouraging. They make me feel like somebody." Mike Delta, too, mentioned his instructors, such as Mr. Battle, his IT teacher, but

more than a teacher-student relationship, he recalls another moment—when he didn't have the proper clothing or attire, and by sheer intervention on behalf of the faculty and staff relationships he had built, not only did he leave the same day with a new $300 suit, but also with a new model for "trust" and self-confidence.

Remembering the story, an emotional Mike Delta asserted, "That's what made me want to strive even harder . . . someone always cares about you, even when you don't care about yourself." He went on to express what he had taken from his time at Kenmore & Kokin College: "I feel that everyone should always be trying to increase. Don't be satisfied with where you at—'cause it's never the top." Additionally, Mike Delta also made an important distinction between being present in the classroom and "learning." He claimed, "Coming to school means nothing. You could tell someone . . . make sure you come to school every day . . . I mean, nothing. You could come here and do whatever you want…learn." Speaking again on how Kenmore and Kokin College provided services post-intervention, Delta remarked, "I enjoy that you can go. . . it seem like a principle . . . but really it's like a counselor . . . all that . . . any time you want. They help you with getting a job. They set your resume up."

These descriptions are in drastic contrast to the post-reflective content that Tia mentions about the state college. She says, "The teachers are not going to know your name. You are indeed a number." She recognized that she must find a new way to navigate and negotiate this new interpersonal space and campus culture. Yet, at Kenmore & Kokin College, as Mike Delta points out in his interview, even after completion of a student's program, advisors and staff set up conferences to guide and nurture student progression, and such relationships set up a degree of emotional immediacy, warmth, and support in the interactions they provide. They happen on a first name basis. The quality of students' relationships, then, with teachers, peers, and

administration matters, far beyond the space of an office or a classroom; it is a fundamental substrate for the development of academic engagement and achievement and, as referenced by these sensitive and articulate observers, relationships do not end after the completion of a degree but carry on in the emotional lives of those who cherish and find deeper meaning in their value.

Spirituality. Though many are uncomfortable seeing the spiritual or purpose-driven side of students' educational journeys, in many ways, it is in their spiritual selves where students are able to find meaning in times of hardship, a place where they feel at peace or are centered with where they are in their living spaces and where they see each day as a gift and feel at ease about their life direction. This connection to the spiritual self plays an important role in the quality of one's educational experience for non-traditional students; it aids in shaping how they respond to experiences that are potentially stressful but simultaneously provides hope for something better.

In Aloha's interview she said, "I got to go back to school. I was happy but I just want more. I see more I see a brighter future, you know for me and then like they said I wake up every morning and just put God first, and if I put God first I know what I'm going to get my Associate's degree." She goes on to explain, "Like I said life is living. Life is experiences when I go home I write to God I thank God that he is giving me the strength to stay focused in school, plus dealing with my family, plus dealing with outside things to keep me going more to be strong. That I'm not losing it or giving up." What is evident from these statements is a sense of strength derived from concentration on a goal and the faith that the goal is possible with focus. Aloha continued to talk about her spiritual relationship with her higher power. She noted the aspect of grace as an important element: "Like I said God has given me a second opportunity and it's a new beginning?"

Tia additionally shared much of the same sentiment, stating, "I mean they scared us, and I said you know what? God is going to handle this . . . nobody has the last decision on life but him." When hardship took over and things seemed hopeless, she remembered the words from her pastor: "My pastor Bishop Robert L. Sanders supported me when I told him I was going back to school he told me to 'press, push, and pursue.'" These were meditations for Tia, and they led her to a place of faith and belief. Even in her interview, the words felt like a prayer. She repeated them genuinely: "He said you can achieve excellence. If you put God first, He will not make you last."

Mike Delta seemed to ring with the same sentiment. He spoke in contradictory terms but with great reverence for his higher power and the essence of the spiritual connection in his education. The way he saw other people even resonated with what he saw as the origin of all life. He said, "We been criminate for so many years what give me the right to talk about somebody else when God made all of us. We all the same race, human." Sharon repeated, "God got me through this" and even said, "Couldn't have made it without God." Sophia broke it down to two activities: "I pray and drink red bull. That's what I do." Her quick to stick slogan came to life when she started telling her story:

> I prayed a lot because I had to work around my schedule with work I prayed I remember just I said "God it's too much for me, I have to give it to you because I can't do it." And I left it just at that, and before you know it I just you knew it I just took each day, I took my time, I got done what I needed to get done, did my hours as I could do wrote a letter to the Dean asking for an extension and explaining why I needed it and they had no problem with giving it to me and it was just that two weeks that I needed to finish up the hours for internship and I made it in the nick of time.

Sophia's spiritual life bled into her romantic relationships. She noted, "Well first and foremost, what I love about this man is that he is in the church he is in search of the Lord . . . He reads the Bible to them, I don't read my Bible as much as I should but he does."

Lastly, Mariah's interview was peppered with spiritual reflections. She said, "Without our family and our faith in God, we wouldn't be able to do this," and "I was able to, thank God, find an internship at my church which is True Bethel." Her spiritual journey and educational journey found numerous spaces of overlap. She even believed that the initial calling to attend college coincided with the ad she saw about the college: "I saw a commercial with [Kenmore and Kokin] pathways program and the Lord said, 'Go there and try it.' And I did" It is in these moments that the participants identified a larger purpose and felt the calling of their higher power align with the fruitful nature of their education.

Familial support. What is apparent through Pre-cyclical failure and the Re-entry phases of these participants' experiences is family involvement as a co-constructed, shared responsibility. Some students pursue school because of family members they lost and feel indebted to. Others pursue education because of the love and support from family members who refused to let them quit. Such meaningful and effective involvement on behalf of the family structure includes not just parents' and caregivers' behaviors, practices, attitudes, and involvement with the institutions where non-traditional students learn but also these institutions' expectations, outreach, partnerships, and interactions with families; sometimes, it isn't until the students gain success that they also gain respect and acceptance for their hard work from their families. In her interview, Sharon talked about breaking the pattern "of high school drop outs in her family" She wanted to be "role model for her family" since she never had a "solid family foundation growing up." For Sophia, though, "It was because at the time so many people in my family were looking for support. You know, my mom was down and out, of course and trying to juggle the death of my brother and still be able to take care of what I needed for myself was

difficult." Family played a strong role in both Sharon's and Sophia's family, especially in terms of instigating a culture that insisted education was a necessary route toward bettering life.

Mariah had a slightly different story. She reports, "I called my dad on his birthday and told my dad happy birthday and I got my GED. He was happy. My mom was happy also." This familial support was driven by pure encouragement, rather than the drive to do something that others in her family deemed impossible. Mariah states, "It made me want to do better and made me realize that they were right, that I could do anything that I set my mind to." The praise didn't come from just one part of the family. In the interview, she said, "My grandfather congratulated me when he learned that I had received my GED," and after she completed the program, her sister told her, "anything I needed she would help me."

Aloha's family was also supportive, but there was a major interest in schooling to make her family's life easier: "My children are so happy for me, and that's another reason why I came back to school because their generation is just so hard right now. It's just totally different from mine, and I want to show them that you know after all this and you have these entire siblings around each other, and none of y'all have graduated." Tia also saw her education in much the same way. She said, "I just want these memoires to build upon and showing them you got to go forward to show my kids, my grandkids that they can become successful . . . I want to lead by example." Sky said she went back to school to prove a point. She suggested, "Well I'm going on because I can tell my grandkids and my son 'you got to go to school.'" Later this would become a shared moment: "When we [her and her grandchildren] got the diplomas together." She said, "That was an accomplishment."

However, despite all of the positive familial support, not all students get the same treatment. Alexandria said, "So I know they have my back and I know that they support me, but

they have their own ways of doing it and that's just to simplify that in simple terms." She went on to explain, "My mother is proud of me but what she can remember is another story. She probably won't remember, even though and not true." Though Alexandria seems to understand her mother's situation, it still pains her to think about it so when her mother expressed elation over her accomplishment, it was important: "She does remember. She tell me all the time 'I'm proud of you,' and all I ever say is 'Ma you really remember?'"

Mike Delta confirms another strong connection with family. In his interview he said, "My mother graduated from here [Kenmore & Kokin]." This is essential information to understanding his story. Mike becomes part of an intergenerational tradition for attending the college. There's more on the line for him than simply completing a degree because not completing a degree means failure, not just on his behalf, but on behalf of who he is expected to become. Such a drive and expectation is a factor concentrated not only in his individual self but also in his collective self-identity.

Stage 3c: Post-Intervention: Culture of Completion—Self-Identity

Failure and fear. The fear of failure is directly linked to self-worth, or the belief that one is valuable as a person. As a consequence, students will put themselves through incredible psychological maneuvers in order to "save face," or avoid failure and preserve the sense that they are commendable. Particularly for non-traditional students, the fear of failure can have long-standing consequences, for the fear usually is combined with a long and troubled educational history. If individuals do not have confidence in their ability to succeed—or if repetitive failures diminish that belief— then, they could begin, consciously or not, to engage in practices or make excuses in order to preserve their self-worth, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of others.

With this kind of rejection, the more intense the effort behind the failure, the more important defense mechanisms become, and in order to avoid failure, students make excuses, procrastinate, and don't participate. There is, admittedly, a lot less at stake, if one takes education less seriously. In Stage 1: Pre-cyclical failures, students reported a complicated history with school. Often times, there are negative connotations or set negative expectations about completing their higher education. In Stage 2: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline, students are put in positions of having to face fear and fail openly and without shame. For instance, many participants reported taking their GED test more than once, but through commitment and perseverance, they passed. Now, in Stage 3: Culture of Completion, students havw seemingly learned resiliency, taking these lessons with them and facing their fears in new spaces.

Tia, for instance, when talking about the difference between the state college, the larger state university she attended after Kenmore & Kokin College, affirmed that "It definitely a different world when you attend a state university. It's a lot more students. Much bigger. Huge classrooms, which the seating was like 50 to 70 seats. Wow!" In Tia's explanation we hear echoes of trepidation. Perhaps, she is beginning to second guess whether she belongs in the space she is in, and she recognizes that the campus is not only bigger in size but the time taken to acclimate to Kenmore & Kokin College and cultural rules, mores, and taboos of a smaller campus may not be the same. However, as with most non-traditional students, these anxieties alone are not what turns a student away. In her interview Tia explained, "My first semester was going well, but things started to transition and transpire. December 2012, just before the first semester ended, my dad passed away. January 2013 comes and I went right back, and started the

2nd semester. When I did, things just started going down for me. My grades really went down, they plummeted. I lost my motivation. I lost my concentration. I lost my focus."

Tia's experience is not unlike others who detach themselves from otherwise strong support systems to explore other options on their own, and the culture of completion is not only about the completion in itself but also the skills and tools one has gathered to aid in making real-world application. Once the safety mechanisms disappear and students are left to deal with the complexity of life outside of school, it is the habits of mind and sheer determination that keep a non-traditional student from falling back into old patterns, especially when circumstances and events don't align perfectly. Tia expressed that she "wasn't excited to get to school like I experienced before; so everything went downhill and then June 2013 received a letter from the state college placing me on academic probation. After that semester I ended up back on probation again. September 2014 I was unable to return to." Despite her downfall, Tia re-enrolled in Kenmore & Kokin College to complete her degree in Court Stenography. She didn't simply give up on her education. Instead, she found it necessary to search for an identifiable solution to her problem and to push through her fear of failure.

Achiever/role model. Distinctions between educating and socializing are commonly made, and the two have also been unpacked by some philosophers and scholars as more or less the same. Commonly, the dissimilarities hold socialization to be the process of preparing someone to be a competent social agent within a particular society and education to be something that occurs in addition to that preparation. Underlying such distinctions is an implication that anything that is socializing has implicit in it the impulse and tendency to make people more alike, and the contrasting impulse and tendency in education is to make people more distinct. Of course, we know this is not always the case. Culture, the story of how we invest in

one another and build community, is learned, and learning is a process uniquely related to being human.

Socialization is what happens every day of our lives; it is not planned. It involves learning our identities, the nature of reality, and how to get along with others. While it involves learning, it mostly happens along the way. Education, in contrast, is planned and usually involves a formal organization with the responsibility of providing and monitoring the learning; it concentrates on finite skills and knowledge. Despite the fact that these two conceptual frameworks seem to be in conflict, it takes both for higher learning to take place, as witnessed in Stage 1 where fear and failure controlled the narrative of students who were otherwise paralyzed by feelings of rejection and in Stage 2 where during intervention student overcame previous labeling to discover new identities in the space of academia.

Now, in the culture of completion, students reflect on their experiences. Tia said of her experience, "Going to Kenmore & Kokin College, it's like you are the first in a lot of things. It's just a great accomplishment." With that realization, Tia herself feels the transformation. No longer is she simply a student. She is now a role model: "A lot of things that I wasn't taught**;** I made sure it was taught my daughter did not fall behind. My daughter so I thank God that my daughter did not fall behind." Notably, she is also supported by and supports her daughter: "Me and my daughter, we have each [other's backs]." In much the same way, Jennifer stated that she felt good "because I feel because I am the oldest person in my Class. I'm 61 years old. I'm the only one left and I'm the oldest out of all of the students." With her age, also comes wisdom. Jennifer mentioned that there were "eight students," and she suggests, "A lot come and ask me questions. They will come or call me or text me and ask me regarding homework assignments." Moving now toward completion, Jennifer opens up: "Makes me feel good," and ironically,

Marissa gets the same sort of feeling. She said. "It is actually over the moon, right now. I'm just very happy and my confidence is really boosted. I mean I don't even listen to people anymore, negative people."

What is happening during this stage is transformation. Students are beginning to step out of the learning stage and give back to others who were once in their position. Take Mariah, for instance, who said, "Even if I help just one other person to keep going with their goal and their dreams, then I've accomplished something because my number one goal has always been to help somebody else, because somebody else stepped back to help me when I wanted to give up. So I've always tried to help somebody else." Aloha extends the same sentiment. She stated the following:

> I want to help the youth; I want to show the youth I mean I want to be some kind of supporter for them. I feel that I should come in and help the youth. I mean because I've been through something. I know the challenges young people are experiencing, the battles that they are going through. Look what I have done, I've been through. I have an amazing story, and you know if you put your mind to it you can do anything.

Sharon, too, was reminded of her desire to reach out to her community and reaffirmed the value of school: "I said you got to have an education in order to get anywhere…I think I'm going to follow and my mom's footsteps and I hope my kids follow in mine." To that end, what she has to offer is priceless. It is her wish that her "nieces and nephew say, 'If my auntie can go to school, I can go back and know I can stay in school.'" Being a role model helps her to achieve and also holds her ultimately accountable for how her hard work is perceived: "If I can go back to school and do it, they can do it. So that's what I instill in my kids now."

In terms of a culture of completion, Sharon and others alike have learned by relabeling and repackaging their identities, discarding past negative language and history. Now, they are not students, but leaders. The first important socializer is learning a language, and those who

share a language also share a considerable part of their view of the world, which is encoded at a level of presupposition in the terms, distinctions, and structure given in that language; it teaches conventions which are shared by communities and groups who aim to communicate and read with critical awareness. The level of self-identity and the willingness to give back, as spoken in the following interviews, is progressive and strong, and it speaks to the overall purpose of empowering and validating oneself to seeing the process through to its completion.

Stage 3d: Post-Intervention: Culture of Completion—Self-Validation

We experience a number of tough moments and situations during our education that temporarily or semi-temporarily shake the basis of our self-worth and identity or diminish the meaning of our personal existence and educational journey. Being criticized or ignored is one of the most self-invalidating experiences because our life revolves around social relationships and self-concept. At this point, students have gradually moved from pre-cyclical patterns to re-entry into the educational pipeline, taking the final step— culture of completion—maturating, experiencing epiphanies, and accepting each new challenge as something not just realized but actualized. It is a lonely and alienating experience to be criticized or misunderstood by others, and many of these students speak to similar experiences and previous educational histories that are painful. It hurts to be treated as someone inferior or unworthy of others' attention and respect, but through promoting a positive self-identity, accessing the proper support systems, and demonstrating the grit and determination it takes to turn setbacks into comebacks, students can persevere and reverse the model or template that produced their fear and anxiety with regard to the role of education in their lives.

Maturation. Throughout Stage 1 and Stage 2, as they are presented here, as time went on, many students matured into different versions of themselves. During re-entry, Jennifer

mentioned needing special treatment because adult learners "are older" She said, "We need a little more encouragement. We need a little more understanding and a little bit more." Likewise, Charles spoke of the responsibilities of being a full time student, where he took "15 to 18 hours of courses" and acknowledged having to "stay on my toes constantly" to make sure he submitted "work on time." Additionally, Jack was adamant about getting over his previous fears and with some strong statements decided: "I don't care if I get scared or not, I'm going to do it."

Through these bold statements, students are modeling the maturation of a non-traditional student, one that is absorbing who they are as learners and becoming more aware of what that means. Aloha confirmed by having this to say: "I don't party a lot, but I do take time off for me. I think the older I get the wiser I become. I feel good; it's great it feels like a new beginning for me." Denise also seems to acknowledge that there needs to be a consistent equilibrium for success: "You know you told me one thing which was about balance. You got to have balance in all the things that you do. Well how can I go to work, go to school and still come home and take care of my family. You must be able to do all of that and be able to balance."

As Jack emerged from the intervention stage and gets closer and closer to completion, he can see the difference: "Well, I have more self-respect for myself now doing…trying something and doing it, and succeeding." He also recognizes a direct correlation between the way he perceived himself and his education and the overall result of his hard work. In his interview he intimated, "Yes, you know it's like if you can do something and do it well . . . I noticed that if I don't feel like I respect myself, I didn't do well. And it poured over into my classes." The difference to Jack was clear: "I started have self-respect for myself a lot more, and I did feel and do a lot better in my classes. So, believing in yourself and respecting yourself will carry you over into other things."

Epiphanies. Creating a learning environment where inquiry is valued and integral, where purposeful and passionate learners are encouraged to ask questions and discover themselves in the process is an important aspect of making learning authentic. Students who find themselves during their educational experiences often report the phenomena of epiphanies. Often these epiphanies are single experiences made up of many tiny experiences that bring a student not only to self-realization but also to self-actualization. In the culture of completion, Tia speaks of this concept:

> I said what can I do? I contacted Kenmore & Kokin College Amherst Campus to inquire about their paralegal program. I returned to Kenmore & Kokin College Amherst Campus where I enrolled in the paralegal program I should be done by the end of this December 2015.

Tia's courage brought her back to an environment where she could learn and grow. Not only does such a decision require maturation but also that light bulb moment which calls a person to action. Marteen thinks back to a similar time during this study when something dawned on her much the same way:

> At the luncheon I was so upset one of my teachers came in from when I was in grammar school, and the way she acknowledged me was "Oh that was that little bad girl that used to be fighting at school all the time." Who wants to be remembered like that? You know It made me feel bad that's not how I want to be recognized. I'm thinking about how I can change that? Like how can I get that thought out of people minds like I need that thought of me to change? So you start with yourself, Right. Right. Even though it's still hard too, because I've changed and people still are not proud of me

> Some parts of our education seem lodged in our brains only long enough to pass a final.

But more often than not, most students have vivid memories of lessons learned or epiphanies encountered in the classroom or during their educational experience. These are not always epiphanies of class content. Some of the courses students take serve them well in their careers or vocations; some of them merely haunt their anxiety dreams, but, all in all, it is the process of

finding oneself in that process that is never forgotten. Higher education is not intended to indoctrinate. If it is truly the great equalizer, it is intended to empower. For that reason, it should be concerned most not with what students think but more with how they think; it should provide students with the proper tools to figure out on their own what they think.

Seeking new challenges. The culture of completion could not be what it is without seeking out new challenges after validating the self. Many students secure jobs beyond their college experience, and when they do, there's the opportunity to actually see what their education as produced. Marteen reflected, "I went in for the interview . . . with the guy . . . he told me that he like my presence and he felt and when I was sitting there. He told me that I would make a good worker and asked me for some references." She continued, "It's a job it gets me by."

Aloha added in her interview that she wanted "my own business one day. I want to own my home, car I just want to have a bank account. I can go and draw some money out and go have dinner of take my kids to dinner. Simple things and you don't have to worry about spending a dollar." Charles also had a focused set of plans for "attending RIT working on his bachelor's" and even "aspiring to Cornell University for graduate degree." Beyond college, Charles looked forward to "becoming a Naturalized US citizen in June 2015, which will open more doors mainly unlock the importability into the government sector, since they want US citizen under their ranks, versus foreigners. So that would definitely ease up my potential in the job markets."

Tia spoke about seeking new challenges and had this to say: "I see myself in the next five years being an accomplished and successful office manager. I love the office atmosphere I want to do anything in criminal justice system that what I want," and Sharon considered the following: "I might go for a medical surgical nurse . . . I want to continue my education."

Conclusion

Essentially, the fourth chapter contained authentic narratives constructed from data gathered while facilitating open-ended, unstructured interviews with 14 non-traditional students, specifically, adult learners who had graduated from the college's Pathways to Success Program, Pre-Collegiate Academy, and Achieve Program. As the researcher, I created a project that granted me the opportunity to follow participants—from the beginning of their adult educational pursuit to its completion—monitoring their academic journey along the way. In this study, the students' re-entry into an academic setting began with the Pathways to Success program, followed by Pre-Collegiate Academy, and then onto completion of the Achieve Program. Occurring during this study, these academic programs paralleled the experiences of participants, exposing the core survival skills that each student had when faced with a myriad of life-changing adversities. This study revealed the on-going challenges faced by non-traditional students who are typically considered insignificant, or even minuscule, when similar challenges occur during that stage of our lives simply regarded as adulthood. Taking for granted that every adult is prepared and ready to cope with the challenges that accompany the routine activities of daily living proved to be even more taxing for these adult learners as they carried on, attempting to complete a task that was started—in spite of the obstacles and deterrents in their path.

Moreover, by observing the life adjustments of the participants upon returning to school, identifying their progression through the academic process, acknowledging their struggles and defeats, and celebrating their triumphs and accomplishments, the narratives reveal that the genuine capabilities of the participants emerged when the necessary supports to foster resilience and promote achievement during their academic journey were extended to them. Witnessing these non-traditional students demonstrate more self-confidence, increased motivation, and an

indisputable desire to seek new knowledge—arriving at a successful outcome—resonated throughout each narrative detailing the participants' journey. Thus, the development of a culture of completion for non-traditional students that defies the odds, demonstrating the ability to set academic goals and attain these goals, now alters a substandard label. The participants in this study not only obtained a GED but also successfully completed all requirements for an associate's degree—even amid the looming persistence of factors that could have held them back: namely, learning disabilities, lack of familial support, physical/mental disparities, death and dying challenges, and a lack of positive self-validation.

Discussion and Implications for Future Research

The purpose of this descriptive study was to give voice to the social and academic experiences of non-traditional students on the urban campus of Kenmore & Kokin College in New York, and to share the lived experiences that promoted or impeded student persistence to graduation. This chapter contains the analyses of the interviews and the research that captured the stories of adult learners from ages 25 to 64. These findings, gathered from the 14 participants, created an original voice for discussion that lends new meaning to the conversation surrounding non-traditional students in higher education. These results will be considered in light of the primary research questions that opened this study:

1. Is student self-identity linked to academic achievement and successful outcomes?
2. What role did faculty support and/or classroom environment play in student persistence in seeking admission into college—in particular, Kenmore & Kokin College?
3. What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their postsecondary education at proprietary colleges?

This chapter includes (a) a brief summary of the research study and its limitations, (b) a discussion of the primary findings in relation to three theoretical frameworks, (c) consideration of the three research questions, and d) implications for future practice.

Summary and Limitations of the Research Study

Non-traditional students are a growing population in higher education that has recently been defined as the "new majority" (Complete College America, 2011, p. 6). Economic challenges**,** changing work demands, and the desire for personal and professional advancement fuel the support of these adult learners' return to school. In order for the United States to

compete with or match the best performing countries in the world, at least 10.1 million adults aged 25 to 64 will need to attain an associates and bachelor's degree by 2020 (Kelly & Strawn, 2011). Notably, these numbers are increasing, yet our understandings of the factors predicting success have not. Non-traditional students have remained invisible within the institutions of higher education, but "leaders continue to generate policy decisions about higher education while critical information is absent; about 40% of the students, attempting success or failure was less important than that of traditional full-time students" (CCA, 2011, p.2). To that end, non-traditional students remain uncounted and underrepresented in postsecondary education, and it can be strongly argued that they continue to remain disconnected primarily because of relationships developed between systems and institutions that operate along the traditional model.

Moreover, non-traditional students are challenged by the characteristics that work to define and systemically restrict them. When breaking down the psychosocial and socioeconomic factors, as well as considering the isolation and lack of social support given to non-traditional students, it is not hard to see why this population more often than not generates poor academic outcomes, whether that means filing through student retention rates or tallying up how many students actually graduate. Despite such social disconnections, this population is projected to increase in higher education enrollment. The following research captured the stories of transformation and modifications—one's personal metamorphosis from failure to completion. The process of coding themes and analyzing student voices—what they said and how they reacted to similar circumstances—divulged a pro-active, rich, and meaningful data collection. This data was coded by individual themes and group themes, placing each major theme in ranking order, while also tracking the number of times these themes recurred.

As a result of this process, three major emergent themes were discovered; these three macro interventions demonstrated a non-linear movement of growth and development, beginning with PRE: representing Cyclical Failure, DURING: representing the Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline, and POST: representing a Culture of Completion. These three macro themes also included a secondary set of sub-dominant themes:

1. Personal Life Experiences,
2. Support Systems,
3. Self-Identity, and
4. Self-Validation.

The secondary sub-dominant themes were identified in the various stages of growth and development as searched for successful outcomes. Conclusively, I drew parallels from a human kaleidoscope of social disconnections and unresolved pain associated with poverty, loss of significant loved ones, and unemployment. These social disconnections, too, revealed slowly that they were additionally coupled with blame and shame, doubt and despair, and other faces of fear as students attempted to re-create a new pathway for success. Though students would struggle with unfamiliar content and confront learning barriers and impediments in working toward the completion of their degrees, the true challenge lay not just in the classroom but in producing transformational change in behavior that would become the stimulus for their second opportunity for crafting a new life.

Limitations of the purposeful sample. Although the participants in this study were largely African American, there were also White males and females that did take part in the study; nevertheless, all can be identified as low income, non-traditional students. Out of a population of approximately 30 students that met the criteria, 14 participated in the study, which

is slightly less than half of the overall population. Moreover, in addition to these numbers, the demographics of Kenmore & Kokin College make up seven locations in the western New York area; this study focused on those students who were students at the New York urban campus and were exclusively part of the Pathways to Success Program, Pre-Collegiate Academy, and Achieve Program. Within the urban population, literacy programs have served as the catalyst for achieving High School Equivalency Diplomas (GED) and entering college. Some critics do not view this alternative diploma in the same light as those earned by traditional high school (THS) graduates. By design, then, it was the purpose of this study to monitor the process for three semesters of GED graduates after they had completed a required English and mathematics course in an urban for-profit college. This particular study, working under these constraints, was limited to students enrolled in the Pre-Collegiate Academy and, thus, reflects a small population of those students who began in the spring of 2010. Alternatively, the study concentrated on student-centered learning in a positive environment that provided the academic support necessary for all students to achieve success at Kenmore & Kokin College.

However, the limitations are extended also through services that were offered to some students, but not all. The students in this study were offered uninterrupted services: one academic advisor from the beginning of the student's participation in the program to completion, earning an associate's degree. Pre-testing and post-testing, along with extensive tutoring sessions, were limited to this same small group of students in an attempt to better prepare them for a college readiness curriculum. Hence, students attended daily math and English courses at the college readiness level for 15 weeks to increase their comprehensive skills; these services were not afforded to all students seeking admission to the college. The impressive bonds and emotional attachments that developed during this process, the creation of a family-like

atmosphere, facilitated student expression of personal feelings relative to attending the college and staying the course. Students were reassured that they would not be judged; instead, they would be supported and nurtured throughout this academic experience. In each stage of their advancement, patterns formed and shaped how their past and present were inextricably linked to one another. The following timidities and trepidations were discussed weekly as part of the guided support group, which was not available to other first generation college students entering Kenmore & Kokin College. In this convergent space it became evident how these students' educational journeys had either stimulated or discouraged them, inspired or moved them but, ultimately, pushed them into an exciting, but unfamiliar territory, where they would find themselves progressing further from their struggles and eventually closer to their success.

Theoretical Frameworks and the Research Questions

I thoroughly examined each of the three stages of growth proposed in the analysis and applied their progression to three theories that I considered most explanatory of the findings: Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm; Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam's ideas about social and cultural capital; and Nel Nodding's ethics of care model. In the remainder of this discussion I will examine the research questions from the perspective of the most relevant selected theory and the proposed stages of student growth. The discussion begins with the research question related to self-identity and Fisher's narrative paradigm.

Fisher's narrative paradigm and self-identity. Is student self-identity linked to academic achievement and successful outcomes? Throughout the course of this study, participants spoke in descriptive language and elaborated on the integral convergence of their past and present life experiences. The voices of their academic failures were expressed mostly as a disconnection with systems of education and, primarily, during an extremely confusing time in

their lives. There are many theories that give weight to the convergence of past and present life experience: that is, the past creates a template for understanding how the world works for us and affects how we operate in the present. We come to build an expectation for how things are and how things are going to be, giving us a reference for future expectations, and frame of thinking comes to function like a narrative or story in which we invest ourselves. For this reason, Walter Fisher's (1978) theory narrative paradigm is useful in that it defines narration as symbolic actions, words, and/or deeds that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. Fisher believes that all communication is a form of storytelling and, moreover, that the study of narrative is the study of the ways humans see and experience the world.

This concept is refined into the view that education and educational research is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories and that learners, teachers, and researchers are storytellers and characters in their own and others' stories. From this vantage point, then, one of the most important stories we tell ourselves is our life story—the story we tell ourselves about ourselves—an internalized and evolving cognitive structure or script often mirroring the dominant and/or subversive cultural narratives within which the individual's life is complexly situated (McAdams, 2006). Narrative theories have offered their contribution to the inner-patterning and meaning of human lives by seeing history, biography, culture, character, gender, class, race, and ethnicity, among other things, through socially constructed narrative lenses. As human beings, we endeavor to distinguish and identify the relationship between our life story and the next person's, and with the features of individual variation in human lives, there is an attempt to account for the factors within a person's inner life and in the person's environment that aid in discerning patterns for how we not only live and contribute to, our lives but also construct our lived experiences.

As a method of taking responsibility and becoming advocates of their own learning, regardless of what had occurred in their lives or whatever happened in the past, these students were able to choose positive behaviors that would help them meet their own needs more effectively in the future. However, these behaviors did not arise magically; students sought to reconstruct their livelihoods as evolving stories that integrated the reconstructed past and the imagined future in order to provide life with some semblance of unity and purpose. More importantly, changes came about because students were willing to take a hard look at who they were and who they wanted to be, and the most important individual differences between people manifested themselves in this study as thematic differences that were derived from their narrative identities.

Narrative paradigm: In Stage 1: Pre-Intervention, Cyclical Failures, students recounted the narratives of their previous educational experiences before intervention via the three major programs mentioned in this study, namely the Pathways to Success Program, Pre-Collegiate Academy, and the Achieve Program. In each student's interview, data collection provided a number of similar themes spread across different narratives situated in a complex and shifting matrix of teller, text, and context. In his theory Fisher (1978) suggests that not all stories are created equally and that the world functions as a set of stories from which people choose and, thus, constantly re-create their lives. He further notes in the paradigm that (a) people often make decisions on the basis of good reasons, (b) history, biography, culture, and character determine what people consider to be good reasons, and (c) narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories—coherence being the way a story is organized and put together and fidelity being our ability to determine whether a story matches our beliefs and/or experiences.

In Stage 1: Pre-Intervention, Cyclical Failures, the language used to describe students' educational experiences form a plotline—both conscious and unconscious—where behavior and experience are guided by the internal factors of external situations. For example, Charles felt that his childhood had "obstacles where it kind of prevented [him] from going to college or even getting out of high school." He further noted, "being labeled a special education" student was something that troubled him. His own mother told him that he "didn't [begin] speaking" until he was "six years old." Further lending coherence to a distinct and divergent, but overall unhealthy self-narrative, the patterns are set up comparatively for Charles to feel inadequate and insufficient as a student. After graduating high school, Charles still felt he had accomplished nothing: "Technically, I did graduate from high school, but it was like I had no degree [diploma]. It [would be] nearly impossible for me to even attend college . . . I didn't have the education level to keep up with the work." The following details of Charles's story shape more than the answers to a couple of interview questions; they pronounce more definitively how his story conveys troubling patterns indicative of his self-worth and self-esteem as it relates to his educational history. If we view Charles's interview and think of it in terms of narrative, what we are left with in the Pre-Intervention phase are the tools he has available to him to make sense of his education, a rather flat and depressing story arch and plot structure with him at the forefront as the protagonist.

Additionally, Mariah expressed during her interview much of the same. To reinforce this pattern, she said, "High school math was a struggle, and the only reason" she "didn't graduate" was because she "didn't pass the math." On the tail end of this description she added, "and for me, math was my worst subject." Hidden in Mariah's words are a simple outline for not only her high school experience, but also her conceptualization and fear of a particular subject,

mathematics. The implication is that her previous history had asserted that she was not a sub-par student, necessarily, but one who was uniquely troubled when it came to mathematics, and this debilitative trait, or what she conceived as a trait of which she seemed to have very little or no control over, so she thought, had alone hindered her ability to succeed in high school and would likely carry over into her other educational experiences.

The deep structure of these statements again illuminated that there is not only an issue with self-confidence but also with what Mariah feels is an injustice, tracing its path from exposition to resolution. The way she shapes the narrative suggests that, for the most part, in nearly every subject required besides mathematics, she was proficient enough to pass and that it was this one subject alone that had been responsible for placing her in the position she was in during her Pre-Intervention phase. What is important to note is not whether Mariah's story is true but whether she feels that it is true. If one were to imagine not only repeating such a story to oneself over time but also continually having it reinforced in one's life path, where perception of a subject or one's aptitude or ability to succeed are coupled with outcomes that are moreover embarrassing, awkward, or disconcerting, it becomes rather obvious how math may appear intimidating to such a student. The student may avoid math or view the subject as an all-out assault against her character, perhaps learning to equate math with feelings of inadequacy or rejection. The analysis of this kind of everyday talk and cultural discourse emphasizes ways in which lived stories make for multiple and contextualized selves, even as they serve to integrate lives in time and highlight how the self performs in the internal life and in the external world.

The stories detailed in the Pre-Intervention stage work for and against students in the process of re-entry, and, for some, these stories are their first barrier to educational success before they ever become immersed in the college experience. The following realization comes

to life more so in Stage 2: Re-Entry into the Educational Pipeline. Some students told stories of fear and failure before ever enrolling in the program, as with Charles and Mariah, but there were others. Sharon felt "guilty and ashamed" before ever coming to class. Jennifer was "discouraged" because she was "older." Aloha stated that she's always had "low self-esteem when it came to education," because she "dropped out" when she "was 14." In this case, the way students are describing their previous educational experiences gets carried over into their present lives. It's essential then to understand that these stories are inextricably intertwined with how these students view their education. One's perception of self is indivertibly linked to one's life story. Upon re-entry, even when removing other external factors, non-traditional students are faced with the normal challenges of everyday students while balancing the weight of previous experiences that more often than not instill doubt and fear. To go along with the negative connotations associated with educational institutions and the self-deprivation and low self-esteem that projects itself onto what is expected in educational settings, the challenge is to work upon this template and modify how students re-conceptualize the story of their education.

This is specifically essential for the non-traditional student. Non-traditional students, as a population, particularly return to school for practical reasons; more often than not, there is a change of employment or job loss, a desire to improve job-ready skills, a life transition (change of location, divorce, etc.), or a drive for self-enrichment due to some unforeseen legal or economic event. Whatever the case, these students are looking for a shift, a way to reconstruct life stories into redemptive sequences. Often these redemptive sequences involve a protagonist delivered from suffering to an enhanced status or state. Compared to their less generative American counterparts, these caring and productive, mostly midlife adults, are men and women who are typically invested in their own family and work lives and who tend to be very involved

in community, civic, and/or religious institutions. In everyday life, following a sequentially redemptive life path is difficult and frustrating work; however, if the narrative is constructed that suffering in the short run often gives way to reward later, a new story is created, and sustaining conviction and motivation becomes less challenging.

Within Stage 2, the following shift in plotline is manifested in the sub-theme of Failing Forward. Sharon constructed this familiar narrative when she noted that "I went through so much trying to get my GED . . . and to get my associate's degree," but even through her struggle she asserts, "I never stopped. It was just the drive in me." Marissa, too, faced obstacles but managed to overcome them. In her interview she said, "My first semester was kind of like really nerve-racking because I was actually trying to get the feel for college like most college students do. There's always that nervous energy trying to be perfect . . . I mean it's definitely the first semester . . . really scary. But I got through it." Additionally, Charles had the chance to learn that he was not defined by his previous educational experiences, and this took hold especially during the taking and retaking of his college entrance exam. He admitted that "Despite the fact that it did take me four . . . tries to get in. First time though it was like I pretty much easily passed the math and reading, but it was like my grammar kind of kept me down a little bit." Charles then filled in the rest of the storyline: "The other two, I kind of had a bad run with the test, and then the third time I pretty much beat out my math score, and I placed a test by scoring a 90 . . . I was placed in a pre-college English and College Math for my first semester."

If we look at these participants and attempt to comprehend their life stories at Stage 2 as on-going narrative and map their experiences as a plotline, there is substantial movement and modification in rising and falling action and even turning points, which signal transcendence during the handling of some crisis or conflict and perhaps, more importantly, the overcoming of

that crisis or conflict. To that end, it could be argued that the creation of life stories is important in the development of motivational learning contexts and that by normalizing failure and teaching students how to fail with grace, they, in turn, learn how to create the proper emotional space for resiliency. By focusing on the lives of students and the achievement of a level of education that integrates cognitive, emotional, and social aspects, what has begun to emerge is the framework for Stage 3: a Culture of Completion. Polkinghorne (1988) describes the encompassing and powerful role that narrative has in imagining different possibilities in our lives.

> The products of our narrative schemes are ubiquitous in our lives and surround people with the language to describe the world; they fill up our cultural and social environment and give shape to the experiences that arise within it. We create narrative descriptions for ourselves and for others about our own past actions, and we develop storied accounts that give sense to the behavior of others. We also use such narrative schemes to inform our decisions by constructing imaginative "what if" scenarios. (p. 14)

These scenarios arm students with the power and agency to create new paths to success and, with the necessary tools, make real-world application possible. Notably, the majority of students in this study not only completed their degrees but also secured jobs beyond their college experience or capitalized upon the opportunity to further their education. As noted, Marteen reflected, “I went in for the interview . . . with the guy . . . He told me that I would make a good worker and asked me for some references.” She continued, “It’s a job . . . it gets me by.” Aloha aspired to run her “own business one day.” Charles made plans for “attending RIT” and “working on his bachelor’s” and even “aspiring to Cornell University for graduate degree.” Tia created a new life story for the next five years: “I see myself in the next 5 years being an accomplished and successful office manager.” What is evident in these accounts is the will to aspire to something better by building on the positive framework of accomplishments. For

many, although the degree is completed, the story of these students' lived experiences continues to evolve; a degree is no longer a destination for them, but part of a journey forward, a path to their contribution to the human story, to their fields and disciplines. They are no longer outsiders, searching for a culture where they belong, but movers and makers of culture—the new writers of history and new gatekeepers of society.

If narrative rationality is determined by the coherence and fidelity of our stories, as Dr. Fisher suggests in his theory narrative paradigm and if the world we live in is indeed impacted by the set of stories from which we choose, and thus constantly re-creating our lives, then it is paramount that upon re-entry into the educational pipeline students are confronted with the understanding that they are creating, co-creating, or recreating the story they commonly find themselves living. Their stories in this study provided a window into understanding the building blocks that helped to construct their narrative identities. Many of these students' narratives support Fisher's ideas of recreating a narrative identity. These students described a return to the educational system after being detached (some for over a decade) and sharing that they were in pursuit and searching for an educational experience that would meet their personal needs and provide them with opportunity upon completion. Our life story tells us who we are amongst conflicting and, sometimes, contradictory worldviews. Some see their stories as dramas, epic adventures, tragedies, even as comedies. However, if the stories are disheartening, discouraging, or depressing, with some slippage, of course, they could be interpreted as gloomy existences. After all, history, biography, culture, and character are the interactional narratives of how we see and seek to represent time, space, ourselves, and the world.

Many students in this study faced setbacks in their personal life experience, but through facing these setbacks during the intervention stage, the liminal space between what had come to

pass and what was possible in their future endeavors, though a gray area of uncertainty and ambiguity, gave these students the heart and endurance to press on. As noted in Stage 3: Culture of Completion, they learned to turn setbacks into comebacks and eventually seek out new challenges. The culture of completion could not function as a positive outcome evident from these students' educational struggles without their seeking out new challenges and applying themselves in other social arenas. In seeking to understand how narratives and stories lend coherence and consistency to human life by organizing its many discordant features—settings, plots, characters, scenes, images, and themes—students' educational histories and lived experiences seem to be a rare and untouched space for figuring how the internalized stories people live by hold integrative power in creating, co-creating, and re-creating the self. During the findings of this study, particular narratives students carried with them, whether it be in the stage of PRE: Cyclical Failures, DURING: Re-entry into the Educational Pipeline, or POST: Culture of Completion, surfaced. The theoretical landscape of narrative paradigm, then, suggests a more integral role that narrative plays in our individual and collective realities; therefore, it requires not only a confluence of the social-construction of self and the consequences and repercussions present in one's lived experiences, but also the various voices which stitch together such a complex social fabric of identity.

Social Capital and Humanizing Educational Spaces

What methods can be employed to successfully guide non-traditional students to completion of their postsecondary education at proprietary colleges? In the past two or three decades, scholars have taken an interest in three different perspectives on non-traditional students, records of educational completion, and the link between social and cultural capital. Many of these suppositions are based on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and

Robert Putnam. Each is distinct in its own definition, but for purposes of viewing poverty and privilege and how these various definitions relate to the factors of why non-traditional student high school dropouts continue to be excluded from of the inner-circle of accomplishing success, Bourdieu and Coleman are helpful in examining why exclusivity exists.

As explained by Bourdieu (1977), who proposed the term of social capital with his attempt to distinguish it from economic and cultural capital, the term emerges as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 119). Therefore, social capital recognizes the performativity of social stratification in a class system. It addresses primarily the ways in which society is reproduced and how dominant classes retain their position because of location in a social structure. Although distinct from economic capital and operating in a different way, it is essential to understand that social capital is ultimately inseparable from economic capital, much the way Payne (2005) emphasizes the interconnection between the nine factors of poverty presented in the second chapter.

Bourdieu (1977) attempts to address the social inequity caused by the levels of people's ownership of cultural capital by describing groups with advantaged cultural backgrounds that mirror their resources of economic capital. Moreover, these privileges grant them more access to resources, particularly material resources, but also social or non-material ones such as insider information or knowledge (Field, 2003). Here, social capital shields the elite, deployed to ensure that the "wrong" kind of people don't enter particular social circles by creating a kind of force field of insider knowledge to social mores and taboos unknown to outsiders (Bourdieu, 1977).

Researchers have defined social capital from a perspective that emphasizes using it as a lens through which to analyze social norms, rules, and social trust (Kahne & Bailey, 1999; Portes, 1998; Putnam & Feldstein, 2003). James Coleman (1988), an educational expert, defines social capital: "persons' actions are shaped, redirected, constrained by the social context; norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organization are important in the functioning not only of the society but also of the economy" (p. 96). Such a definition markedly includes characteristics of dense grouping, showing how norms reinforce shared beliefs and trust, which make social capital productive as human beings act out (perform) their roles within certain social contexts and locations within the social structure. Coleman (1988) proposes a model in which social capital is one of the "potential resources that an actor (performer) can use, alongside other resources such as their own skills and expertise (human capital), tools (physical capital), or money (economic capital)" (p. 96). However, social capital is not necessarily owned by the individual but, instead, arises as a resource that is available to the actor as a privilege. Notably, these kinds of social contexts produce group assets where members can perform under the normative expectations of their discourse community without realizing the same social contexts are not available to other groups (Dika & Singh, 2002).

The following is helpful as we view the normative perspectives in education, for one of the major strengths of social capital theory lies in its ability to analyze the processes of educational attainment and academic achievement. For instance, Horvat and Lewis (2003) were interested in the socialization of Black students with regards to academic success and looked at how Black students who achieved academic successes overshadowed the less successful academic performances of their critical Black peers. At the social level it was found that peer groups commonly discouraged their fellow members from putting forth the time and effort

necessary to do well in an academic setting and from embracing attitudes and customary practices that enrich academic success. These findings are particularly important to the research of this study where 12 out of 14 students who participated identified as Black and/or African American. Furthermore, in Stage 3: Culture of Completion, many students spoke to this distressing trend Horvat and Lewis explained in their study.

Many of the subjects articulated a need to achieve, not for their own validation it seemed, but to show "haters" or naysayers that they could change and stand firm in the face of discouragement from their peer group. Marteen noted, "Your old friends come by and try to pressure you into doing things but it takes a strong person to say no. You know people get mad at me when I say, 'No.'" Here, we see Marteen consistent in the face of criticism when reacting to her peer group. Sharon, who identified as Black, also faced disparagement from those in her inner circle. As noted previously, she asked, "[What does it cost] for somebody to believe in me? It don't cost nothing, but is so hard for people to do it." Sharon reacts to her peer group in a responsible way, but, still, she is singled out for her pursuit of educational completion. The normative expectations of the discourse community in this study proved to be regularly opposed to adopting appropriate academic attitudes and behaviors because those behaviors and attitudes were considered to be opposed to blackness.

The trivial labeling is learned and exclusive, even ostracizing, but more telling is that in the social context of academia and in the culture of its make-up, there emerges a social structure diametrically opposed to the socialization of Black students. Black students are thought of and think of themselves as outsiders, and this thought process constrains them to otherness where "norms, interpersonal trust, social networks, and social organizations" (Coleman, 1988, p. 96) as allies do not truly exist for inclusivity. Tia's interview outlined a number of reasons that she

didn't finish high school, but she mentioned more than once the importance of having someone there to "push you" and be your "support system." As social capital relates to high school drop outs, a quantitative study conducted by Croninger and Lee (2001), found that social capital was inversely related to the high school dropout rate. The study drew data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study to examine the influence of perceived social capital. Their findings suggested that those students who are at-risk socially and academically were more likely to drop out than their peers not categorized as at-risk. However, those at-risk students can possibly reverse negative influences by constituting institutional relationships with their teachers and faculty.

When combining Croninger and Lee's (2001) study with Horvat and Lewis's (2003) study, the next step is to develop an expanded understanding of the concept of underserved populations and alternative educational strategies that integrate normative expectations of the academic discourse community while realizing the same social contexts are not always implicitly available to other groups. As an academic advisor my role is multifaceted, providing more than academic direction to students. In addition to providing academic counseling, the college and its advisors build alliances with community and government institutions that provide key supportive systems for non-traditional students as they strive to rebuild a better future. As a result of a poor experience in high school, the majority of our students come to us with a broken and defeated sprit from an educational system that provided few positive relationships with their former teachers. Advisement sessions frequently include discussions of such issues as the immediate threat of homelessness or the loss of daycare services. Food stamps or medical coverage issues that pose major risks to students who want to remain in college are major topics of discussion. Consequently, many students bring an attitude of hostility, hopelessness, and distrust that

academic advisors must counter with nurturing support and mentoring in order to help rebuild students' self-confidence and self-respect. When recalling a time where she did not pass the placement exam for PCA, Marissa said, "Mrs. Benton came to the rescue: "Don't worry about it . . . we'll try again, and the second time . . . That's what I love [about the college]." Mariah described her relationship with advisement. She declared, "I think advisement is critical when it comes to students and just having that one-to-one relationship having open communication with them. [Mrs. Benton would say] 'Well, you meet me after class, or you can come in another day and I'll help you with whatever you need help with.'"

However, advisement is not the only area where methods can be employed to humanize educational spaces. Muller (2001) explored the influence of caring relationships between teachers and students with regard to achievement. The research analyzed the teachers' and students' perceptions of their relationships and the effects of their perceptions on students' math progress. The findings suggested that those at-risk students who perceived their teachers' concern benefited from the accumulated caring relationships, and students were particularly vulnerable to their teachers' opinions, especially if their math achievement was barely at a passing level. Muller (2001) concludes that disadvantaged students are likely to benefit from building caring relationships. In such circumstances, encouragement from teachers helped make a difference with regard to the students' future in school.

As has become a cliché, some of the best things in the world are free: relationship building with and among students who lack the integration of social and cultural capital may be initiated by simple encouragement coupled with a caring atmosphere within the classroom. Jennifer recalled, "Dr. Welch makes you feel good. Ms. K, she was my pre-college English teacher. It's like you know they just sort of encouraging." Such nurturing mentorship that goes

beyond academic advisement plays an important role for our non-traditional male and female students, especially for our under-represented, minority students, but more so for minority female students.

In her landmark study "Within Our Reach," Lisbeth Schorr (1988) points out that for many such female students family breakups are a major aspect of their lives, leaving them divorced and abandoned for the sole support of their children. In order to attend their classes, these students are often accompanied by their children. Many of these students have little stability in their lives, very busy schedules, and often inconsistent, unreliable childcare options. Included within this grouping, more often than not, are the elderly, single mothers, and incarcerated males. Among these groups, notably, a majority are single mothers attempting to seek a better way of life by acquiring their GED and postsecondary degree. Large portions of single mothers are financially subsidized by a number of social welfare programs such as Medicaid, food stamps, housing, and educational benefits.

As underserved populations, these young women commonly utilize the social welfare system as an opportunity to escape the ravages of poverty, but while financial assistance has proven to be one of the qualifying constructs associated with escaping poverty, single mothers maintain limited knowledge of how to navigate the financial system, including student loans that assist in the support of their education. Marteen explained, "I dropped out of high school because I had a child. I actually made it to my senior year, but I had a baby and it prevented me from going to school . . . I breastfed my daughter . . . it took her one year and a half to get off the breast milk. By time graduation and finals, I wasn't able to make it and this prevented me from graduation from high school." Jennifer provided her insight on being an older adult student juggling family and school. She said, "We are older that we need a little more encouragement . .

. Other things that we have to deal with like family, kids, and grandkids . . . younger kids don't understand they don't have to deal with all those issues." Many studies also point to mothers who are forced to drop out of college as a result of a family crisis, leaving them in financial debt without obtaining their personal goals of academic success (Adair, 2008). Adding insults to injury, the emotional resources, which serve as a means for navigating the art of conflict resolution, are more often than not unavailable or unlearned, further leaving these students unable to communicate the pain of an injustice.

It should not be surprising then that violence is regularly associated with a lack of emotional resources in the event where communication breaks down as the voices of these young adults frequently go unnoticed or are repetitiously muted and/or silenced. Hostility may occur in the face of unwarranted blame, and usually the aforementioned experience is not one that occurs in isolation. Many students who fail or drop out are blamed holistically for their inability to fulfill requirements that stand outside of any regard for how their home and learning environment may shape their social and emotional lives, and, further, instructors, administrators, and advisors may lack the empathic imagination to regard the pathways that produce failure. Armed only with a voice commonly muted or silenced, these students are often blamed for such shortcomings in their educational journey. Without the ability to repeal such claims, the relationship between educational institutions and those who work and reside in them and the populations they serve, sets the precedent for victim blaming scenarios. In these scenarios, instructors, administrators, and advisors may lack the self-reflection to be critical of their own institutions: that the problem is not only one of personal responsibility, but also systemic accountability. Thus, schools and those who play a role as educators or administrators must be

careful about blaming the victim (only) and be aware of the inability of schools to care and love students different from the stereotypically White, middle class, cognitively intelligent learner.

Along with such troubles of social capital, there is also the poverty of empathy and imagination to include the impoverished, to admit them relevant, equal in the capabilities required in educational institutions, but more strategically, also for others to understand what it means to emerge from living a life of constant struggle against economic poverty, marginalization, and the less-known, less-paid-attention-to everyday experiences of those living in impoverished circumstances. To the credit of this particular set of non-traditional students, there were no students who had been involved with reported criminal activities or had been exposed to the criminal justice system. Through the lenses of Bourdieu and Coleman, a phenomenology of sensitivity emerges that suggests support for student actions and reactions, offering a window into the social fabric and interactivity that binds student life and campus culture.

In Stage 1: PRE-Cyclical Failures, students were in search of continuing education, attempting to identify a relationship that would prove the most beneficial for their learning. Many tested a number of educational programs. All elected to enroll in the Adult leaning Pathways for Success Program in hopes of obtaining their GED. As a result of the life experiences of many non-traditional students, especially those who come from urban backgrounds, stories of survival are often probed and questioned, or treated as being unbelievable to the point of dishonesty. This situation occurred on two occasions during this study. When the educational system failed to maintain accurate records, one student who was home schooled had his paper work lost. The educational system denied ever providing home- school teachers for the student. Another student was housed in a juvenile detention

center where her paper work was not transferred to the appropriate school. These two horrific experiences, as unbelievable as they seem, challenge the ethical and authentic principles of the student's story telling features, which very well could be identified as dishonest narratives where instructors, administrators, and advisors lack the self-reflection to be critical of their own institutions, acknowledging that the problem is not only one of personal responsibility, but systemic accountability.

There is a tendency to doubt these student perspectives partly because of other significant systemic forces. That is, residing in all communities, but especially in impoverished communities, are reinforced stereotypes and prejudices, which often mimic the experiences of *everyday racism* (Essed, 1991): human actions that break down the social fabric, working to instill deeper divisions between people through complex constructions of racial and/or cultural identity. A study conducted by San Francisco State University Professor Alvin Alvarez (Alvarez & Juang, 2010) identified everyday racism as subtle, commonplace forms of discrimination, such as being ignored, ridiculed, or treated differently. Explains Alvarez, a counseling professor, "These are incidents that may seem innocent and small, but cumulatively they can have a powerful impact on an individual's mental health" (Alvarez & Juang, 2010, para. 3). Individual and collective expectations of unequal treatment could be linked to a deteriorating self-concept for many who live in poverty but who are seeking out education as a transcendent force to escape. Further, the experience of everyday racism in educational institutions may send hidden signals to students.

In Michael's case, he felt a strong disconnection with teachers; he sensed that they would become "frustrated" when trying to help him "build an essay." Most of the time these signals are buried in body language, attitudes, or speech. These signals, while veiled, act as sign posts,

suggesting or outright telling particular students that they do not belong, that they deserve to be disregarded, derided, or treated differently. Furthermore, forms of everyday racism in educational systems breed mistrust of educational institutions not only for students but also for those who work for them; consequently, students facing the following pressures require added support and discipline not to drop out, and it is the responsibility of instructors, advisors, and program administrators to understand the potential outcomes of everyday racism on particular student populations.

The success of order in our society becomes essential to understanding the following situation and is manifested through various kinds of discipline, all of which are fixed to the social, emotional, behavioral, environmental, and boundary-based conceptions of learners. In the past it has been vogue to consider discipline to be lacking in urban America. For instance, one of the primary factors that exist among non-traditional students is the family as a supportive system. Often thought to be the foundation of socialization within the home and in urban environments that are stripped of valuable social, emotional, environmental, and boundary-based resources, the family often socializes and teaches social mores and taboos. Mothers (single mothers and other mothers) often have the primary responsibility of parenting, but they commonly also come from a lineage of broken homes. In many instances, these women are associated with a strong spiritual concentration of hope and faith, connecting their spiritual resources, including daily prayer for their children's health, welfare, and safety.

In this study these connections are manifested in Tia and Sharon, who both report strong spiritual lives outside of school. It should be noted that the power of God and religious faith are recurring themes in narratives of those who come from impoverished homes. However, this relationship with spiritual guidance provides families in poverty another linkage to escapism;

their strong attachment to spiritual resources commonly reinforce the coalition of the church, which connects them to an extended family acting in or substituting for natural familial roles. In doing so, the church proves as a training ground for youngsters in the community when other factors are deficient, and, in some circles, the church is viewed as a multipurpose arena for training students to enter the work force. It is in these essential spaces where such socialization occurs, learning how to speak and dress properly. These spiritual activities encourage relationships and provide role models to young people.

In Aloha's interview she said, "I wake up every morning and just put God first, and if I put God first I know what I'm going to get my Associates degree." She explained, "Like I said life is living . . . I thank God that he is giving me the strength to stay focused in school, plus dealing with my family, plus dealing with outside things to keep me going more to be strong. That I'm not losing it or giving up." Tia also stated that education "scared us, and I said you know what? God is going to handle." She additionally remembered, "My pastor Bishop Robert L. Sanders supported me when I told him I was going back to school he told me to 'press, push, and pursue.'" Often there are deacons in the church and Master Masons in the community that establish mentorship relationships with the youth.

Though these mentorships are important and sometimes prepare students for the kind of mentorships offered in educational spaces, they can also give false impressions about the nature of learning in different environments and at times reinstate marginal attitudes, which can come ultimately not with the price of a quality education, but simple assimilation. Without social, emotional, behavioral, environmental, and boundary-based discipline in the home and the family to reinforce the socializing strands of selfhood, the everyday situations of the impoverished are passed on to reproduce, and as long as this reproduction prolongs, systemic forces will continue

to imitate and mimic the conduct that maintains its template. To that end, social capital and the knowledge of hidden rules surface as an early introduction to critical race theory, for it was the hidden codes of prejudice and the psychological demonstrations of inferiority that established hidden rules in defining the social character of minorities within the United States. Discrimination was veiled in the covert and overt rules of racism. The hidden rules continue to challenge our society as individuals attempt to move into middle class America. The above characterizations provide a basis to understand the role social capital, poverty, and everyday racism play in the educational experiences of non-traditional students, especially for Black students or those who represent blackness to others in society. This framework, coupled with significant demographics including housing, the social background of students, and their families, provides a lens into the lives of non-traditional students. The lack of educational motivation and aspiration is compounded by the reality of depleted social capital, continued poverty, and increased alienation.

Ethic of Care Model

As a result of these findings, a salient disproportion of humanism, sensitivity, and caring was exposed as it related to the students in this study. What emerged from the troubling life scenarios and the disclosure of difficult but colorful experiences was the need for an ethic of care model. In educational theory, the ethic of care model is commonly attributed to Nel Noddings in her work *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984). Flinders (2001) comments on Noddings work as follows:

> Noddings describes the fundamentals of ethic caring where she positions her thoughts of "natural caring" which she describes as a form of "caring that does not require an ethical effort to motivate it (although it may require considerable physical and mental effort in responding to needs. Natural caring, thus, is a moral attitude – a longing for goodness that arises out of the experience or memory of being cared for. Noddings also explores

> the notion of ethical caring a "state of being in relation, characterized by receptivity, relatedness and engrossment." Though Nodding's work is insightful in that it gives flesh and humanism to a dehumanized and commonly underrepresented demographic, concerning itself with those downtrodden or displace, in this model, what caring actually means and entails is not that easy to establish. Noddings's approach involves connection between the career and the cared-for and a degree of reciprocity; that is to say that both gain from the encounter in different ways and both give. She goes on to say "one must learn what it means to be cared for." Then, gradually, we learn both, to care for, and by extension, to care about others. (p. 211)

This *caring about others* is almost certainly the foundation for a sense of justice. As caring relates to school and education, Noddings defines education as a constellation of encounters, both planned and unplanned, that promote growth through the acquisition of knowledge, skills, understanding, and appreciation. This is plainly exhibited in the many experiences related throughout the study where relationships take precedent. In students' lives, this ethic of caring, though hard to pin down, seems to, at times, mark the difference in their ability to continue their education. Tia, for instance, describes dropping out of high school because of a lack influential relationships and very little support. She notes, "it was a lot of things were going on. . . . And I didn't have that push. . . . [To tell you] like . . . don't give up, don't give in, don't throw in the towel." However, in this vein, when looking at Tia's reasoning for continuing her education and not giving up on her first time, she mentions the words of her pastor, the diligence of her advisor, and the care and support she received from instructors. Further, previous educational failures mentioned by other students like Sharon, Sophia, and Jennifer convey the same pattern. In fact, one of the decisive factors and determiners to staying in school and not giving up was the formation of a support structure, where the cohort acknowledges, "We used to help each other." Marisa intimates that it mattered to her that the faculty and staff "talk to you like you're people and not just a paycheck, or money in the bank" and that you could "actually sit there and have a conversation."

Interestingly enough, in her work, Noddings places great emphasis on the home as the primary educator and argues for the re-orientation of social policy to include the role that homes play in the children's educational success. The home is viewed as the primary educator, and two major things follow in terms of social policy (Noddings as cited in Flinders, 2001). Every child should live in a home that has at least adequate material resources and attentive love; second, schools should include education home life in their curriculum (Noddings as cited in Flinders, 2001). Mike Delta, one of the participants, shares the importance of reconnecting with his father. He notes, "he had cancer, so I can't disappoint him. He had so much before he was 25. My father was in the Air Force. My father was getting his Masters." Mike Delta's relationship with his father became a driving force to push him forward despite his own troubling circumstances. The care of his father kept him from quitting or dropping out: "I just don't wanna; I just feel everything I do wrong would let him down, and I feel I haven't let him down yet." Ethical caring's great contribution is to guide action long enough for people once again to interact with mutual and spontaneous regard. Mike Delta's situation on the surface may be interwoven with particular emotions that he has trouble properly identifying, but through coming in contact with and struggling with his own story, he becomes more aware of his own personal responsibility and its connection to others. One could argue that this is the groundwork for experiencing empathy, a critical element of civic responsibility. For some, this awareness is transforming and offsets previous negative experiences and history within educational institutions and society.

Another relevant theory related to the construct of "care," is Watson's model that emerged in the healthcare field. Watson's (2001) caring theory is well known to the nursing profession; however, it may also be transposed for usage in education. Applying this theory to

education, Watson suggests, "developing and sustaining a helping-trusting, authentic caring relationship" and "being present to, and supportive of the expression of positive and negative feelings as a connection with deeper sprit of self and the one-being cared for" is essential piece to building trust (Watson, 2001, p. 347). Thus, to build this trusting and caring relationship with the student, the advisor must be aware of the boundaries of care and not transverse into intimacy. Caring requires the advisor to have a deep connection to the spirit within the self and to the spirit within the student. Watson's model also speaks to the importance of maintaining the dignity of "other" by acknowledging the uniqueness of the individual. In many ways, we can observe this in the participants when Sharon declares "If you get a relationship with the staff, like I said it's even wonderful," or Jennifer's recollection: "Dr. Welch, makes you feel good." Mariah directly speaks to the advisor's role when she states, "I think advisement is critical when it comes to students and just having that one-to-one relationship having open communication with them." Michael speaks to a restoration of dignity when speaking of one of his instructors: "I felt his vibe you know like me, from the streets, you know and he had that big brother attitude…He just broke it down to me and in my way of learning, this somebody who cared." Michael's comments are indicative of a relationship of care that goes beyond disseminating classroom content.

Watson (2001) describes two additional characteristics of care: the transpersonal caring relationship is a "consciousness and moral commitment to make an intentional connection with the patient" (p. 112) and the caring occasion or caring moment, as "the space and time where the patient and nurse come together in a manner for caring to occur" (p.112). In many ways, these elements of caring emulate the dynamism present during the stages of transformation in this study from Pre-Intervention, Re-Entry into the Education Pipeline, Post-Intervention, and Culture of Completion. Sharon questions, "[What does it cost] for someone to believe in me? It

doesn't cost anything, but it is so hard for people to do it." Her insight is valuable in that it provides a need for closer inspection upon what care actually means in the educational settings. By applying Watson's framework to student progress, first, it is important that instructors, advisors, and the like are not trying to diagnose them or do not treat them as if they have something debilitating wrong with them. Instead, the model of caring that overlaps here should be representative of being present and supportive of the expression of positive and negative feelings as they are related to student experiences and working to build a trusting relationship that preserves dignity.

Identity Formation

The preservation of human dignity through an ethic of care allows for an individualized understanding of non-traditional students and the complex maturation and experiences that shape their identities (Kasworm, 2005). Kasworm's understanding of the non-traditional student was developed from her work in community colleges with students 25 years or older who are learning in intergenerational classrooms. Her framework consists of the exploration of "culturally and socially mediated identities" that a student constructs from their experiences in the variety of life roles that they inhabit, "self, learner, worker, family provider, and community participant" (p. 4). Her work illuminates the challenges inherent for non-traditional students in creating an identity as they navigate the complexities of daily living and their academic world. Wild's (2014) thesis study focused on student affairs services for non-traditional students using Kasworm's identity model as a framework for understanding the unique needs of these students as they struggle with meeting "their perceived vision of the ideal student and believing in their academic competence" (p. 20). In the findings of this dissertation, Charles commented, "I had instructors that actually pointed out where I was slipping up and where my strengths were. I was

gaining new insight on how college life was like in terms of how do the work, how meeting expectations on the college level." His comments echoed Wild's findings that non-traditional students "… also view college as a life choice; so non-traditional students are more confident about their studies and less inhibited in their academics because of their strong commitment and choice to return to college" (Wild, 2014, p. 20). Further, Wild concluded that successful non-traditional students are "more resilient and able to cope in a positive way when stress arises. The ideal student, moreover, has certain beliefs and behaviors of what the ideal academic student should be doing, and students attempt to meet those perceived characteristics and beliefs" (p. 20). In Charles' comments, one can note that he is determining what age-appropriate societal norms are involved in college and what beliefs come with sustaining academic competence; he is creating for himself the construct of an ideal student. Kasworm (2005) also introduced the concepts of positional and relational identities that formed as the non-traditional student negotiated the space of the classroom and their interactions with peers and faculty. Relational identities took hold as the students, through these interactions, experienced confirmation of themselves as individuals and student and believed that they were valued by others regardless of their age or reentry status into academic learning. The importance of being reinforced as they grew in their identity as competent learners was underscored in Wild's (2014) conclusions regarding student services and institutional support,

> This is important for institutions to understand, as they cannot necessarily use the same strategies for academic and social enhancement with more homogeneous groups of traditional students. Both positional and relational identities are meant to provide a positive growth model for non-traditional students, so that they don't feel the full impact of risk in returning to higher education. (p. 21)

Lastly, on the topic of identity as relevant to this research is the dynamic interplay of many selves within the consolidated self in Cooley's (1902) concept of "looking-glass self,"

which is both a compelling and straightforward heuristic model that was used frequently in classroom teaching for the participants of this study. Cooley adheres to the importance of the self being perceived by interactions with others; thus, one formulates an idea of one's self based upon information gathered from the reactions of and interactions with others. He asserted, "individuals look to others to create the understanding of self, stating that one's self appears in a particular mind" (Cooley, 1902, p. 189). Thus, the perception of someone else's experience of us becomes the perceived self, whether or not our imagination of what they perceive is consistent with their experience of us or not. Cooley describes the construction of one's looking-glass self to occur in three definitive steps. The first step, according to Cooley, is "the imagination of our appearance to the other person" (Cooley, 1902, p. 189). In other words, we try, to the best of our abilities, to "put ourselves in the heads of others and try to evaluate our judgment of that appearance" (Cooley, 1902, p. 189). Based upon what we think of the judgments of the external individual, we experience the third step: "some sort of feeling such as pride or mortification" (Cooley, 1902, p. 189).

Personal Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

This study of non-traditional students has been a challenging, yet extremely rewarding, humanistic experience. Significantly, the impressive bonds and emotional attachments that developed during this process, creating a family-like dynamic, facilitated students to express their personal feelings—relative to attending college—and stay the course, knowing they would not be judged. Rather, these students would be supported and nurtured through this relentless (academic) experience. Timidities or trepidations were pulled out through weekly discussions, as part of a guided support group that I facilitated; these sessions provided an opportunity exclusive to the participants at the time that they were students. (This was the only campus in the

system that was engaging in this internal dialogue.) When engaging in conversations with student participants, the reality of non-traditional students' return to postsecondary education illuminated problems related to that journey.

My contribution to the students that participated in the pre-collegiate academy proved to be a multifaceted, incredible occurrence of patience and humility as one of the program founders and as researcher and practitioner. The experience, though demanding, was natural as I undertook the roles that were designed to make this program efficient. Both the goals of the students as well as the objectives that I established as researcher were achieved upon program completion and mutual goal attainment.

My Role: Othermother

From a practitioner's perspective, working in academia and fostering the pursuit of higher education, specifically with non-traditional students in an urban setting, has afforded me the opportunity to be on the ground-level of developing an innovative program that would prepare students for continuing education using a college readiness program as a tool. In doing so, my leadership role was to facilitate internal campus meetings with college officials to establish the groundwork for an exceptional academic program. As an academic advisor, my role was to help this group move forward in finalizing the necessary arrangements to suitably establish a Pre-Collegiate Academy. In the book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Heifetz (1994) talks about leading without authority, which described my position as the facilitator within the group. He suggests, "while we usually focus attention at the head of the table, leadership may more often emerge from the foot of the table" (p. 204). As a leader without authority, the facilitator slowly emerges to the surface, "to clarify our values, face hard realities and seize new possibilities, however frightening they may become" (p. 204). As the primary

advisor and director this experience of learning proved to be a deeply rewarding and emotional experience.

The concept *Othermothers* emerged in Black feminist literature and resonates with my identity and experience. Othermothers has been defined as women who provide care for children who are not biologically their own. This was a common practice in African-American communities "in the form of providing a meal, essentially adopting the child, or simply supplying guidance. Othermothers, believed that 'good mothering' comprises all actions, including social activism, which addressed the needs of their biological children as well as the greater community" (Collins, 2002, p. 179). James (1993) further defines this role as, "othermothers, are usually" mature women who have a "sense of the community's culture and tradition before they can exercise their care and wisdom on the community. Othermothers are politically active in their community, as they critique members and provide strategies to improve their environment" (p. 44).

As an African-American woman, I am able to identify with this concept of helping others with sincerity and true dedication—especially women. Collins (1998) explains othermothers as those who held the family infrastructure together by their virtues of caring, ethics, teaching, and community service. In essence, they are social activists in the community (Gilkes, 1983). Through my active membership in the local Chapter of Links, Inc., a national women's organization that is associated with providing scholarships, social action programs, and cultural exposure to the youth and community at large, I readily admit a need for a time-honored role in today's 21st century, unconventional, ever-changing, diverse society. Collins (1998) considers othermothers to be the "backbone of the black race and give anything that they can to communities" (p. 179). This concept captures my role and presence in the life of the students at

the college where I practice and the community where I live; it is the woman I am. My innate sense of (societal) concern, as well as commitment to my professional and personal relationships with others, are beliefs that I strive to convey and impress upon my circle of influence, my community, family and friends, as well as others that observe my presence within our global society. This practice has proudly been a tradition passed on by my parents who strived to instill a sound sense of core values in their children and those whose lives were touched by my parents' contribution to their growth and advancement as respectable citizens in the community. As an African-American, female professional (social worker and educator), my life has been dedicated to giving to and positively influencing others (identifiably, women) with the hopefulness that I am making a difference within society. Collins (1998) concludes, "othermothers' participation in activist mothering demonstrates a rejection of individualism and adapts a different value system where ethics of caring and personal accountability move communities forward" (p. 179).

As my journey of discovery continued through the dissertation process, it was not limited to academic growth and development. This was— perceptibly—a journey of remarkable internal strength that was extrapolated from the student participants directly involved in my study as I attempted to make meaning of their resilience in weathering the varied storms that stirred up in their lives. For me, this nonlinear narrative of completing the dissertation process revealed distinctive patterns of journeying roads less traveled and detours that included technical, academic, and personal challenges and then staying the course to manage the consequences and rerouting my energies to arrive at a destination of enlightenment and knowledge gained from being flexible and receptive through alternate means of learning.

And, now, my role—from practitioner to scholar—has presented me an extraordinary opportunity for discovery of self. As a result, it has highlighted the impact of a researcher and

the proficiencies needed to make purposeful connections, survey, critically examine and draw out accurate information when breaking down classical literature and comparing these great works to contemporary authors of today. The transformation from a practitioner to a researcher continues to define me. As challenging and impressive as it has been, this transition has taken place, and it has given birth to a more adept, pragmatic researcher. Moreover, I became far more astute of the power of storytelling during the process of this research study. I submit that both the storyteller (participant learner) and the listener (researcher) have become characteristics of who I am today, as an authentic lifelong learner. I continue to think differently and more unconventionally because of this exposure. It has allowed me to unwaveringly seek new perspectives and, decidedly, not limit myself to static understandings of lived experiences.

As my interest continued to crest with regard to narrative voice, my thoughts ventured to narratives of race and ethnicity in the Americas. Sterling Bland, Rutgers University (March 26, 2014) presented a compelling paper discussing Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). This session presented familiarity within a voice that shared my sameness, identity, and voice. The lecture offered an overview of a narrator who writes about his own personal life experiences being Black in America. Racism was blatantly acknowledged as an obstacle to address an individual's identity that included the idea of fighting unrelenting stereotypes within our society. This was not unlike the stories of this research that included the history of pain in being invisible in society to the triumph of discovering self-dignity and identity through academic achievement. Audience participation at the lecture amplified these thoughts through recounting their personal experiences and observations of Black Americans, historical accounts, and views which continue to evoke the true meaning of self-identity: "I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids; and, I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible because people refuse to see

me…When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination-indeed, everything and anything, accept me" (Ellison, 1952, p. 3).

My Role: Servant Leadership

As researcher, it is highly beneficial to serve and assist others in order to securely gather information, build knowledge and understanding during the research process—demonstrating effective communication with others. The ability to interact well with others, drawing out information, as well as transferring/relaying information, is essential. These are also traits of team leading and managing. For Greenleaf (1977), greatness in leadership should arise out of the desire to serve. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. From my consideration, an exceptional researcher should have the motivation to achieve dedicated servant leadership.

"A servant leader does not withdraw from engagement with the system but rather critically engages the system in search of social justice. That is, servant leaders do not merely criticize corruption, injustice, and other structural problems; instead, a servant leader ponders what can be done about it and engages in action and advocacy" (McCellan, 2006, p. 2). As Greenleaf (1977) observed, "criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation it is sterile" (p. 11). More exactly, servant leaders engage in creative encounters with an imperfect world.

The key elements of servant leadership are to encourage collaboration, trust, and foresight and to provide the foundation of ethical use of power (Spears, 1995) via a leadership role. The job of the servant as leader is to enlist others in an effort to build a community of practice that motivates members to create shared knowledge and shared ways of knowing (Drath & Palus, 1994). The servant model of leadership has nine functional attributes: vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modeling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and

empowerment (Russell & Stone, 2002). Spears (1998), CEO of the Greenleaf Center, concludes that Robert Greenleaf's writing incorporated ten major attributes of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community.

In searching for creative ways—as researcher-practitioner—to maintain high levels of retention for young adult learners, we must often strike a delicate balance between serving our students and being critical of college administration decisions. The complexity of balancing my own understandings of the non-traditional student through my own lived experience and the stories that were told in this research by the alumni created a constant source of creative tension and self-awareness. Ultimately, it allowed me to understand more fully the role I had played and might have played in their lived experiences. In reflection, the servant leadership model incorporates the qualities that were tantamount in my role as advisor, mentor, helper, and ultimately, researcher.

Notably, the participants of this study and I have been engaged in the process of total transformational learning. Holloway's (2006) notion of "transformational learning" is a direct result of transformational leadership and mentoring. Further, as Holloway (2006) explains, mentoring and transformational learning go hand in hand:

> Done well, mentoring can promote and incubate values and skills that will build transformational learning processes that a mentee will use outside of the mentoring relationship. As the mentee learns through reflection, problem solving and collaborative innovation within the mentoring relationship, these same skills and approaches to professional [academic] tasks are carried over to other relationships. (p. 6)

The voices of these amazing non-traditional students, their willingness to share their own personal stories, and the mentor/student relationships that have been established with these 14 participants continues to be one of the most enriching, gratifying experiences of my life. The

accomplishments of achieving a culture of completion have become a reality for me—in various life-changing forms—and the participants alike that continue to represent academic excellence, dedication, and community involvement. Throughout this dissertation process, during those stages where feelings of overwhelming uncertainty arose and, even when circumstances produced no words, it was the silences along the journey that kept me inspired as I reflected on those people counting on me to lead my life by example—arriving at this point. It was then that the words became unleashed, and I refocused and resumed on task. To God be the glory for the many things that He has brought me through.

Implications for Research and Practice

The implications present in this study point to expanding knowledge and creating better opportunities for non-traditional students, practitioners, educators, and policy makers by illuminating the non-traditional experience. To capture the rich experiences of such a population, it was decided that conducting and analyzing interviews was the best way of uncovering experiences that might be underrepresented in the traditional student experience. Through conducting interviews and having students selectively frame their own oral histories, these narratives can contribute to future research that is relevant and meaningful to the success of non-traditional students. Future research that examines the relationship among retention rates, attrition patterns, and educational strategies of success identified in this qualitative study hold the potential of making a valuable contribution to educational practice. Such a study would move this study beyond a select and unique sample to a larger population of non-traditional students. Mixed method studies would allow the opportunity to examine student success rates and the specific characteristics or moments that encouraged them to persist or withdraw from educational pursuits.

Overall, the research lends insight into some of the major academic struggles within the learning and testing process. Furthermore, it additionally speaks to the pedagogical realm, introducing distinguished techniques and practices that engaged and supported students' success in and outside of the classroom, connecting learners to their life narrative and helping to create potential pathways for exploring the use and application of their educational experience beyond receiving a degree. A significant pattern that emerged is that many non-traditional students also identify as being othered; a high percentage of this population who were present in this study were women, people of color, and of low socioeconomic status. The following strategies are recommendations for educational leaders and stakeholders to enhance the quest for academic integration of non-traditional students; such integration is extremely critical to their success on campus as is the follow up required to maintain productive life styles and citizenship within their communities:

Administrative, Curricular, Educational Systems

- Recognize the unique characteristics of the non-traditional students by creating privates spaces for both the student/faculty to meet and clarify course expectations.
- Establish a Veteran's Resource Center which provides a common place for returning veterans to share their past and present life experiences.
- Provide and encourage technology use to prepare the student for real world personal and employment experiences.

College Campus Culture

- Empower professional student services staff that counsel and advise non-traditional/adult student to be sensitive to the various types of educational backgrounds/needs of their non-traditional students.

- Employ, for the purposes of recruiting and pre-enrollment counseling, professional student services staff who possess strong motivational and advising skills in order to help and assist non-traditional students with realistic student expectations and establish a sense of community for prospective students.
- Develop an orientation program for first-year students that will establish a buddy system for the entire semester to deal with the many issues that cause anxiety about returning to school and to develop learning skills for academic success.
- Design career counseling and development experiences specifically directed to the higher-order needs of non-traditional students to include internships, service learning, and volunteer experiences as part of their academic focus.
- Encourage faculty members who teach in non-traditional student settings to develop inclusive learning environments that attend to this unique population.

Social Service and Community Support Systems

- Build alliances within the community and governmental institution that may provide current or future support for the student and his/her family.
- Create a student mental health and student health services on campus with direct care to hospital inpatient and outpatient services.

Human Kaleidoscopes: A Lever of Transcendence

A kaleidoscope is a toy consisting of a tube containing mirrors and shards of colored glass or paper, whose reflections produce shifting and varying patterns that are observable through an eyehole when the tube is rotated. The images produced from such an instrument make for constantly changing patterns or sequences of objects or elements. In this study, the kaleidoscope serves a metaphor for student voices and fragmented narratives that come together

to yield powerful abstract meanings from the real-lived experiences of non-traditional students by analyzing their narrative accounts. The relationship between this construction of narrative and its inseparable link to voice is anything but simplistic; it opens the listener/reader to conceptualizing self-reflection, self-refutation, and self-correction, given the conditions for ideation in response. By these conditions, voice is inseparably connected to the psychological action of narrative. In spoken form the reader hears the narrator's voice through tone and pitch of auditory delivery; in written form the reader hears the narrator's voice through the choice of content and style of literary delivery. The author can encode voice (or voices) for different emotions and situations. These voices can be overt or covert.

Through clues in narrative voice, narratives also reveal the narrator's beliefs, values, and ideological stance, as well as the author's attitude toward people, events, and things. With such definitions, narrative voice is often said to be a projection of the author's persona, and which persona the author adopts depends on what kind of story he or she is trying to tell and what kind of emotional atmosphere works best for the story. A life story interview tells the story of a person's life by recording reactions to questions. Usually, the interviewer plays the role of storyteller as he/she writes and/records findings from questions posed; ultimately, the interviewer allows the interviewee to construct the story of the interviewee's past, present, and, sometimes, what can discernibly be made of the future. Thus, in collecting and analyzing life stories of non-traditional students from a particular demographic, this study seeks out and searches for significant commonalities and significant differences in the life stories that people disclose. In telling another's life story, one should concentrate on material that is believed to be important in some fundamental way—information that says something significant about the story tellers and how they have come to be who they are. The life story interview should convey a human

element to research, beyond scholarly communication, and for this reason, theories were employed that emphasized not just analytical or data-driven explanations.

When people study narrative and story, they are studying the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual worlds of others, and simultaneously, consciousness, what it means to be a human being. For this reason there is nothing outside of its expansive and ever-encompassing purview as it is conceived through one's professional field and/or discipline. Because it is cross-disciplinary, researching stories is virtuous in its separation; the writer and speaker work with relationships, not just blunt analysis, which act as levers of transcendence for participants to feel the importance of specific subjects and areas of focus in their educational experience. I feel that using stories to illuminate the social identity and the life paths of the participants in this study brings to the surface the social process of learning, acts as a preservation of culture supports the educational initiative to instill knowledge, and shifts thought in and out of fixed perspectives. To that end, understanding the narratives of history, biography, culture, and character further softens our natures by allowing us to stand in grey areas, connects our sympathies to a larger consciousness, and, thus, makes us more aware of our own existence, our own being.

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